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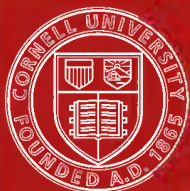
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*The Channels of English Literature*

ENGLISH BIOGRAPHY

*The Channels of English Literature*

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# ENGLISH BIOGRAPHY

BY

WALDO H. DUNN, M.A., Litt.D.

PROFESSOR OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE  
IN THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER, U.S.A.



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Fiske

To

F. G. D.

PATIENT, STEADFAST, LOYAL

COMRADE IN THE QUEST



## PREFACE

IN harmony with the common purpose of the other volumes which belong to this series, I have made an attempt to trace the genesis and evolution of English biography, and to furnish those who may care to devote themselves to a further study of the subject with sufficient materials in the way of references to sources to enable them to make at least a beginning toward the accomplishment of their desire. I believe I am right in saying that this is the first book in the English language devoted to a careful and somewhat exhaustive study of the subject. So far as I know, it is the first of its kind in any language. Beyond brief articles in encyclopædias and magazines, reviews of biographies in periodicals, and a few short treatises, the great subject of biography has remained untouched.

No one can be more conscious than myself of the limitations of the discussion herewith presented. I feel that I have made only a beginning in a work that is sure to be continued. Biography as an Art; Biography as Literature; Biography in its Relations to History, Fiction, Psychology, and Medical Science; The Use of Letters in Biography—all these subjects, and more besides, will some day be adequately treated. They can be only hinted at, or touched upon briefly, in a book of this kind. Yet, again, the whole question of a bibliography of biography remains. The lists herewith given in the appendix are not meant to be complete; they but illustrate certain portions of the main text, and are intended to be only suggestive. There is great need of an approximately complete biblio-

graphy of the subject which will enumerate and evaluate, for the student and the general reader, the really worthwhile works. Some one may perform a real service to students by preparing a complete list and a critical discussion of the short lives and memoirs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The preparation of such bibliographies will be the work of years, but I have no doubt that it will some day be accomplished.

I have met with much encouragement in the prosecution of this work, and owe a large debt of gratitude to many. The Rev. Thomas Davidson, Nevill Forbes, M.A., Reader in Russian at Oxford University, M. Jules Jusserand, French Ambassador to the United States of America, and Robert S. Rait, M.A., Professor of Scottish History and Literature in the University of Glasgow, have kindly furnished information, and helped me by way of suggestion in forming critical and comparative estimates. Sir Sidney Lee has likewise kindly directed me to useful information, has allowed me to quote from his writings on biography, and has otherwise personally encouraged me. Hugh Walker, LL.D., Professor of English in St. David's College, Lampeter, was good enough to read a portion of the work in manuscript. My friend and colleague, Walter Edwin Peck, M.A., Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and English Composition in The College of Wooster, has followed the whole work with great interest, and has gone over it all in proof. Mrs. Anna Robeson Burr, of Philadelphia, whose valuable studies in autobiography have rendered my task much easier, has not only allowed me to draw freely upon her work, but has also furnished specific aid and suggestions. Upon none of these, however, should the blame for any of the shortcomings of this book be charged. As it stands, I alone am responsible for the matter which it contains and for the manner in which all has been presented.

It was my great privilege to be associated during the entire period in which I was engaged upon this work with W. Macneile Dixon, Litt.D., Professor of English Literature in the University of Glasgow. The example of his high scholarship "lightly borne," together with the self-effacing kindness of true culture, has been an inspiration to me. He has never failed to have "a heart at leisure from itself" sufficiently to permit him to sympathise with the most trivial interests of my every-day life.

To the Court and the Senate of the University of Glasgow I owe thanks for privileges accorded me during the two years which I spent as a Research Student in that institution. Within the hospitable gates of that ancient seat of learning, and in connexion with the department of English Literature, the most of this work was prosecuted. For many courtesies, I wish to thank the officials of the Library of the University of Glasgow, the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, and the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh. To The College of Wooster I am deeply indebted for the gift of the time during which this study was carried on.

WALDO H. DUNN.

DUNOON, SCOTLAND.

*June 1916.*





## INTRODUCTION

DOUBTLESS, few people have ever taken the trouble to put the definite query, What is biography? Fewer still, perhaps, have ever attempted to formulate an answer to what seems so easy a question. When we do seek for enlightenment, no host of critics can be summoned to our aid as in the case of such other forms of literature as poetry and prose fiction; for, as yet, biography has not been made to any great extent the subject of critical analysis and discussion. Such criticism as exists is scattered chiefly throughout reviews—often hastily and perfunctorily written—or is contained in a few remarks now and then made by biographers in the course of their narratives. Evidently, it has been generally taken for granted that every one knows what biography is.

It is true that definitions are usually unsatisfactory, and that most of us get along very well in using words which we should be puzzled to define logically. Yet not for this reason should the process of defining be set aside as useless, or unnecessary: attempts at definition are helpful in clarifying thought-processes, and the results are, at least, suggestive, affording points of departure for further discussion. We may see how needful is the attempt in the present instance by the briefest glance at what have usually passed for definitions of biography. Plutarch set before himself the task of "*writing the lives of famous persons,*" of "*comparing the lives of the greatest men with one another.*" No further thought of expressing more definitely what is meant by *lives* seems to have occurred to any one until John Dryden, in 1683, introduced the word *biography* into

the English language and declared it to be "*the history of particular men's lives.*"

To say that biography is the history of one man's life is, at least, to be clear and succinct, but the definition is no more than a beginning of the expository process. It is easy enough to say that the history of a man's life constitutes his biography; it is not so easy to declare what should go to make up the history; still less easy to say just what is meant by the life of which the history is to treat. What do we mean when we speak of *the life* of a man? The expression is common, and every one knows, or thinks that he knows, what the term means. It is clear that notions have differed widely in the past, just as they differ widely in the present. Xenophon believed that he was giving to the world the story of Socrates' life no less truly than Adamnan thought he was presenting before the eyes of his readers "an image of the holy life" of Columba. How different was the ideal of Samuel Parr from that of James Boswell as to what should present the history of the life of Samuel Johnson. Different notions in the minds of the writers were certainly responsible for the different methods employed by Thomas Carlyle in his *Life of Sterling*, by J. W. Cross in his *Life of George Eliot*, and by Horace Traubel in his *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Thomas Jefferson Hogg and Edward J. Trelawny had the opportunity to do for Shelley what Carlyle did for John Sterling: one has simply to taste of their work to see how far removed it is from that of Carlyle, to recognise that it is scarcely comparable to the *Life of Sterling*. One can hardly doubt, however, that both Hogg and Trelawny were as desirous as was Carlyle of presenting *the life* of a man. It is evident that we need to expand the brief definition somewhat fully that we may have a standard to which to refer for purposes of evaluation and comparison.

Biography is, fundamentally, the offspring of an inherent and deep-seated desire in man to perpetuate the memory of a life. Go backward as far as we may into the history of the subject, the underlying purpose is always the same—that of memorial. Some one has lived who, by the power of his spirit or the greatness of his achievement, has impressed his fellow-men; they, unwilling that his spirit and achievement should perish even as his body perished, have undertaken to produce some kind of lasting memorial. From rude heaps of stones collected to mark graves, such memorials have become elaborate monuments or magnificent temples upon which have been inscribed brief records of those in whose honour they were constructed. Or some man, impressed by his own spirit and achievement, and unwilling that all memory of his journey through life should pass away, has taken care to set up for himself a lofty obelisk or a towering pyramid to defy the power of "Time's fell hand." No stretch of imagination is required to see the close connexion between such memorials and the written documents, the books, of later ages. As man came to understand that the written and the printed word endured longer than marble and bronze he forthwith became author rather than architect. Whatever the medium employed, however, the primary purpose of life-record has always been memorial.

The simple memorial-record soon developed into something more elaborate. Such early written documents as have been preserved enable us to follow the probable stages by which life-narrative has developed. Written first to perpetuate the memory of one who had for some reason excelled his fellows, the memorial seemed to gain in value as something of definite achievement was incorporated into the record. To primitive men, deeds were more impressive than the hidden spirit of which deeds are

only the outward manifestation; and to them, great deeds were of more dignity than the small acts of every-day life. The great deeds of great men are, in retrospect, always prone to seem greater. The memorial, therefore, developed into a narrative, a history—usually panegyric in character—of the outward great events in the life of a great man. When a writer happened not to approve of the great man's life, it was an easy matter to transform panegyric into diatribe. By one road or the other, then, the narrative came to serve an ethical purpose. It was easy, also, for the man to be almost forgotten in the course of the narrative of the events in which he participated: the memorial life-record became transformed into history. Again, it became a custom to arrange great men into groups, and thus the individual was well-nigh lost in the aggregate. The clear recognition of the individual, and of the inner spirit—the soul—as the source and mainspring of outward action; in short, the conception of life-narrative as portrayal of character, came at a comparatively late period in the history of mankind.

In the following pages it is assumed that a true biography is the narrative, from birth to death, of one man's life in its outward manifestations and inward workings. The aims of such a true biography in its simplest form would therefore include a record of facts combined with some portrayal of character. In proportion as such a work approximates the complete fulfilment of these aims in all their legitimate ramifications, it approaches the ideal type; that is, an ideal biography would exhibit the external life of the subject, give a vivid picture of his character, and unfold the growth of his mind. In this volume, the ideal type has been adopted as the standard, the test by which all products of biography herein mentioned have been judged. Biography may be said to develop, therefore, in proportion to the

degree of accuracy attained in the presentation of mere facts; the measure of its detachment from panegyric, or other didactic intention; and the extent to which it recognises truth of character portrayal as its first duty. The general process of evolution towards such an ideal has been slow, and in this order: biographers have first groped towards portrayal of character; then, by forsaking the ethical or didactic intention, have striven for truth in such portrayal; and, last of all, have insisted upon accuracy in matters of fact. It need be no cause for wonder that insistence upon accuracy of fact has come last. Biography, as a kind of literary history, has followed the course of history in general, and it is only in modern times that strict scientific methods have been applied to historical composition.

It was long the custom of biographers to write simply about a man, to produce a narrative that contained little of the subject's own personality. Progress towards the ideal type began when writers turned to a use of what may be termed instruments of development. These instruments or aids were such as proceeded directly from the subject of biography himself, and consist chiefly of two kinds: written documents and conversation. Letters, in particular, have come to be recognised as among the most effective aids—letters which are not mere impersonal documents, but letters redolent of personality, letters which reveal the inner spirit, such as those which Sprat refused to employ in his *Life of Cowley*, and which Mason wisely admitted into the *Life of Gray*. It would indeed be interesting to consider fully the development of letters as a vehicle of self-expression, to set forth some comparative estimate of the extent to which the biographers of the world have used them as aids to biography; but the task is beyond the scope of this work. The use of mere

impersonal letters is not, of course, peculiar to English biography; in fact, the custom was adopted from outside Britain. Yet, undoubtedly, the clear recognition of the value of what may be called the intimate letter as a means of character portrayal in biography is due to English writers; and a somewhat exhaustive, though not complete, comparison reveals that the English have used letters for such a purpose in greater numbers and to better advantage than have the biographers of any other nation.

We have now set forth what should constitute the ideal biography. It is clear that such a work would be *pure biography*; that is, in unfolding the life-narrative—in exhibiting the external life, in giving a vivid picture of character, and in delineating growth of mind—it would so subordinate all else—such as the exposition of events, references to other persons, and critical discussions of work accomplished by the subject—as to cause no distraction whatever to the mind of the reader. All the attention would be focused upon the subject: for the purposes of such a work, the subject would stand, for the time being, in the centre of things; other persons, all events, all work accomplished, would be explicable and would need explanation only in so far as they were immediately connected with him. The Rev. Edward Edwards, in writing his *Life of Raleigh*, had in mind the production of pure biography. When writers succeed in producing such pure life-narrative, history proper will be definitely and finally separated from biography. So difficult are the problems involved, however, that pure biography is likely always to remain only an ideal towards which to strive; but the ideal should never be lost sight of.

Autobiography differs from biography in that it is a life-narrative written by the subject himself, and cannot therefore attain the organic and artistic completeness which

we have come to associate with a record written by another. It must always come to a close before the life of the writer. Nevertheless, the true autobiography is, in other respects, similar to the true biography, and must exhibit like aims. Similarly, also, it approaches the ideal as it approximates the qualities already enumerated in the discussion of the ideal biography. Of recent years—notably since the beginning of the nineteenth century—autobiography has come to be regarded as a distinct literary form with characteristics and requirements peculiar to itself. It is indeed closely related to what in general we call biography, yet it is definitely separated from it. Its independence within its own realm is secure and permanent.

To make the intent of certain statements in this volume clear beyond question, and to avoid misapprehension on the part of the reader, a few preliminary remarks may not be out of place. Before the time of Izaak Walton, biography in Britain may justly be spoken of as incidental; that is, there were none who may be termed professional biographers. Either the authors turned from their usual employments to write a single memorial composition, or, in treating of historical events, they incidentally produced something that only approximated biography. It is true that Walton, in the first place, began his work almost by accident, and largely by way of memorial; he soon, however, became a biographer by deliberate intention. Hence we are justified in thinking of him as the first *deliberate biographer* in English, as the first to pass from the production of a single work to the project of completing a *series* of *individual* lives. In this sense, he may be said to stand alone—to be a pioneer. There were, it must be admitted, a few biographers whose work plainly fore-

shadows that of Walton, just as there were voyagers and explorers before Columbus. In the department of ecclesiastical biography, especially, one thinks of Lawrence Humphrey's *Life and Death of John Jewell, Bishop of Salisbury*, published in 1573; of Sir George Paule's truly pleasing *Life of John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury*, 1612; and of Bishop George Carleton's *Life of Bernard Gilpin*, 1628. Of these biographers, both Humphrey and Carleton wrote in Latin; Paule, however, may stand as clearly a forerunner of the promise later fulfilled in Walton: the *Life of Whitgift* is worthy of mention along with any of the Walton biographies. The separate works of the men just enumerated are scarcely comparable, however, to the biographical labours of the author of *The Compleat Angler*. Walton marks not only the distinction between incidental and deliberate biography, but also the beginning of true artistic biography deliberately undertaken. He gathered into himself such scattered impulses as were exhibited by Roper, Cavendish, Humphrey, Paule, Carleton, and others, and gave them definite purpose and artistic expression. His work was both a culmination and an innovation.

There seems, likewise, no reason to doubt that the influence of Roper and Cavendish upon the general development of biography was exceedingly small until well towards the nineteenth century. Where it can be traced before that time it appears principally as a source of history, or as a literary influence in connexion with Storer and Shakespeare. It would be going too far to say that their work had no direct influence upon the course of true biography before the nineteenth century; it seems clear, however, that the influence is almost negligible. Could these works only have been printed earlier and circulated extensively, the development of intimate, artistic biography might have been greatly accelerated.



In treating so large a subject in a space so brief, it can scarcely be hoped that a true sense of proportion has, in every case, been exhibited. It has been necessary to leave unmentioned, as not coming within the direct scope of this work, many biographies which of themselves are interesting and important. Likewise, it has not been possible to do complete justice to any single biography. In many instances, particular works could have much more said for them; are worthy, in fact, of detailed treatment. Thus, Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba* does more than abound in the miraculous and merely summarise Columba's character. As the reader may find out for himself, it reveals—even if indirectly—many subtle traits in the character of the first Abbot of Iona. Other topics treated in the course of the book may seem to be over-emphasised; in particular, the space devoted to verse lives and to the discussion of "Characters" may appear out of proportion. I have run the risk of over-emphasis in these directions. To be sure, verse lives of saints are well-nigh negligible in treating solely of the *evolution* of biography, but not in writing a history of the form: we need to remember the place which they filled; we need to bear in mind that for centuries—while the development of prose biography remained in abeyance—they were the chief manifestation of the biographical spirit, and furnished the principal source of general reading. The average reader has a right to ask for somewhat detailed information in regard to these saints' lives, as well as to be shown why they have little connexion with the subsequent development of biography. *The Mirror for Magistrates*, as the continuation, the legitimate successor of saints' lives, cannot, for the same reason, be passed over. It is full of biographical details, and no doubt is a connecting link between the prose work of Cavendish and the one great

verse life, Storer's *Wolsey*. The "Characters" are the children of the biographical spirit. That critics have found it necessary to point out that they are not important factors in the development of biography is perhaps sufficient reason for making it clear in these pages just what relation they bear to the subject in hand. Other forms of literature, in particular the drama, are also related to biography in so far as they mark the growing interest in human life, in individuals. These other forms, however, have not been thought of as so closely related to biography as the "Characters" have been.

One topic I have touched briefly—the influence of Plutarch and the other classical biographers. I feel that for the purposes of this volume such brevity is not a mistake. When we say that Plutarch, as the "prince of ancient biographers," was at once an example and a stimulus to English biographers, that he made statements so suggestive as to need only amplification and illustration, we have said all, perhaps, that is necessary. Without doubt, the influence of classical biography upon English has been great in many subtle ways: to trace these hidden and often shadowy influences is no part of the purpose of this book.

The chapter divisions herein followed have made necessary a certain amount of repetition, not enough, it is hoped, to be wearisome. Whether biography preceded autobiography, or *vice versa*, is an unsettled point. It is true, at any rate, that autobiography did not assume an important place in English until the latter part of the eighteenth century, and in this fact we find justification for deferring the treatment of autobiography until Chapter VI. With this much clearing of the way, we may proceed to the actual discussion of the subject in hand.

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# ENGLISH BIOGRAPHY

## CHAPTER I

### BEGINNINGS OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL IMPULSE: LATIN PERIOD (690-1066 A.D.)

BIOGRAPHY was for long, and to a certain extent yet is, the handmaiden of both history and literature. For centuries it was recognised simply as a department of history, and, as life-history, was never considered a distinct species of composition governed by laws of its own. Later, when there arose an interest in writers as differentiated from their writings, biography was called to the aid of literature. Still later—not certainly and surely until the nineteenth century—it assumed its rightful place as a dignified department of English literature. Thus it is that biography has a two-fold claim to rank in the realm of letters. As the handmaiden of literature—for there can be no consideration of the products of authorship as apart from the authors—it must ever claim a share in literary triumphs; and, as a unified, coherent, artistic creation, it has assumed, and is destined in a far greater degree to assume, a high rank in the annals of literature. It will be the purpose of this volume to trace the slow, retarded evolution of biography in the British Islands, from its earliest manifestations in a foreign tongue to the rich and full—if not always or often excellent—culmination in the now widely diffused English language.

The beginnings of biography in the British Isles are

bound up with the history of the Christian Church. It is not strange that this should be the case; for, during a period of many centuries, the Church was the focal point of history, from which emanated most of the statesmanship and scholarship of the times. These beginnings—they can be called little more than impulses to biography—take us back to a primitive period in the mind-development of the inhabitants of Britain; to an age of wonder and credulity; to an age when the Church, and things pertaining to the Church, were uppermost in the minds of the educated. It was an age over which the only appreciable literary influence was that of the Scriptures and Commentaries thereon. For such germs of biography as the period affords we must go for the most part to the narratives of the lives and miracles of saints, or to the works of the chroniclers and historians. Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy in the first two parts (vol. i.) of the *Descriptive Catalogue of Materials relating to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* gives a list of 1277 works, most of which treat of lives and miracles of saints.<sup>1</sup> Not until 893, when Asser wrote the *Life of King Alfred*, do we have the life record of a layman.

These early records were written in Latin, and, for this reason, have an historical rather than a direct, linguistic relation to the later development of English biography. Latin, however, long continued to be the language of English writers; hence, a consideration of the subject properly begins with this period. From the great mass of material—concerning much of which there is confusion<sup>2</sup> as

<sup>1</sup> "In studying the Lives of the Saints which have come to us from very early ages in the Church down to quite modern times, we must remember that for centuries they filled a place in literature which is now filled quite otherwise. They were the novels of all ranks of society."—Alfred Plummer, *The Churches in Britain Before A.D. 1000*, vol. i. p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> The following excerpts from Sir T. D. Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, vol. i. part i., are important: "The materials for our

to date and authenticity—it is necessary, for our purpose, to select only a few. While these few belong chiefly to the domain of history, it is yet necessary at least to name several of the most important out-croppings of the biographical impulse, to mention their chief characteristics, and to set forth such development as they evidence; as well as to say something of their historical value to biographers of a later period.

First in point of time comes Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba*, written somewhere between 690 and 700 A.D. Adamnan, an Irish saint and historian, was in 697 elected ninth abbot of Iona, and thus became the biographer of the first abbot, Columba. Three characteristics at once attract the attention of a reader of this memoir: the brevity of the directly biographical portion; the great preponderance of the miraculous element; and the insistence upon the moral of a good life. The work is not at all chiefly biographical, nor is it largely historical; it is hagiology. The part of it which is biographical is reduced to the smallest compass, yet it is in this part that we recognise Columba, the man; it is in this part that we recognise the germ of biography—if not in the English language, at least in the British Isles.

history during the first five centuries (which may properly be called the British period) must be sought for, and are to be found only, in the works of the classical and Byzantine writers, in coins and monumental inscriptions, in the record of oral traditions, in the writings of Gildas and Nennius, and in the lives of the saints. . . . [The age] was fruitful in biography. Libraries abound with memoirs or lives of eminent scholars or ecclesiastics of the period, many of them written by the contemporaries of the persons celebrated, and valuable as containing facts and incidents recorded on personal knowledge, or anecdotes obtained from oral testimony" (p. xii). "If possible, this source of modern history is beset with more difficulty and is more perplexing to the critic than all the confusions and interpolations which arrest his progress in dealing with the *Chronicles*" (p. xvii). "So lives of saints come down to us, like all mediaeval works, the result of many hands—the complex and intricate growth of different times, and wrought together for different purposes" (p. xx).

“ I shall in the first place,” says Adamnan, “ as briefly as I can, give a general summary, and place before my reader’s eyes an image of his holy life.” Here is the portion:

“ St. Columba, then, was born of noble parents ; his father was Fedilmith, son of Fergus, and his mother was Aethne, whose father can be called in Latin *Filius Navis*, but in the Scotie tongue *MacNave*. In the second year after the battle of Culedbrina, and in the forty-second of his age, St. Columba, resolving to seek a foreign country for the love of Christ, sailed from Scotia<sup>1</sup> to Britain. From his boyhood he had been brought up in Christian training in the study of wisdom, and by the grace of God had so preserved the integrity of his body, and the purity of his soul, that though dwelling on earth he appeared to live like the saints in heaven. For he was angelic in appearance, graceful in speech, holy in work, with talents of the highest order, and consummate prudence; he lived a soldier of Christ during thirty-four years in an island. He never could spend the space of even one hour without study, or prayer, or writing, or some other holy occupation. So incessantly was he engaged night and day in the unwearied exercise of fasting and watching, that the burden of each of these austerities would seem beyond the power of all human endurance. And still in all these he was beloved by all, for a holy joy ever beaming on his face revealed the joy and gladness with which the Holy Spirit filled his inmost soul.”<sup>2</sup>

In the closing paragraph of the memoir the moral of a good life is drawn—the purpose, perhaps, for which Adamnan wrote:

“ After reading these three books, let the diligent reader observe of what and how great merit, of what and how high honour in the sight of God our holy and venerable abbot must have been deemed worthy . . . ; and how, even after the departure of his most kindly soul from the tabernacle of the body, until the present day, the place where his sacred bones repose . . . doth not cease to be frequently visited by the holy angels, and illumined by the same heavenly brightness. . . . This great and honourable celebrity [the spread of his fame even to Rome, ‘ the head of all cities ’], amongst other marks of divine favour, is known to have been conferred on this

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<sup>1</sup> Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Translation of William Reeves, *Edition Life of St. Columba* (Historians of Scotland, vol. vi.), p. 3.



same saint by God, Who loveth those that love Him, and raiseth them to immense honour by glorifying more and more those that magnify and truly praise Him, Who is blessed for evermore." <sup>1</sup>

Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba* has been abundantly praised. It has been pronounced "the most complete piece of such biography that all Europe can boast of, not only at so early a period, but even through the whole middle ages." Although it was not intended for history, professing to be simply the record of an individual, all historians, from an early period to the present, have agreed in recognising it as "the most authentic voucher now remaining of several other important particulars of the sacred and civil history of the Scots and Picts." It is particularly valuable in connexion with the history of the Irish Church, of which Dr. William Reeves pronounces it "an inestimable literary relic . . . perhaps, with all its defects, the most valuable monument of that ancient institution which has escaped the ravages of time." <sup>2</sup>

Worthy of mention after the work of Adamnan is the ancient *Life of St. Patrick*, preserved in the Book of Armagh. This memoir, ascribed to Muirchu Maccu Mac-theni, is dedicated to Aedh, or Aidus, anchorite and Bishop of Sletty in the seventh century (*d.* 698), and is thus

<sup>1</sup> Translation of William Reeves, Edition *Life of St. Columba* (Historians of Scotland, vol. vi.), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Edition of *Life of St. Columba* (Historians of Scotland, vol. vi.), to which the reader is referred for full information in regard to this important work. This edition contains both the Latin text and an English translation. These words, too, are worth noting here: "In these lives or acts lies the chief, oftentimes the sole authority for all the knowledge we possess, or are ever likely to possess, of an age and a class of men that form an important link in the chain that connects us with past times; it is a mine, not always the richest, but often the only one, to which the historian of a long interval in the history of this people must look for material. When he has exhausted it, he has exhausted all."—Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, vol. i. part i. p. xviii. Wentworth Huyshe has made an excellent translation of the *Life of Columba* for Routledge's "New Universal Library."

practically as old as the *Life of St. Columba*. Maccu Mactheni was one of the earliest authors to collect material in regard to St. Patrick, and for this reason his work is accounted the most reliable of the existing biographies of the Saint. The influence of the introductory verses of the Gospel of St. Luke is clearly evident in the dedicatory preface:

“ Forasmuch as many, my lord Aidus, have taken in hand to set forth in order a narration, namely this, according to what their fathers, and they who from the beginning were ministers of the Word, have delivered unto them; but by reason of the very great difficulty of the narrative and the diverse opinions and numerous doubts of very many persons, have never arrived at any one certain track of history; therefore (if I be not mistaken, according to this proverb of our countrymen, Like boys brought down into the amphitheatre) I have brought down the boyish row-boat of my poor capacity into this dangerous and deep ocean of sacred narrative, with wildly swelling mounds of billows, lying in unknown seas between most dangerous whirlpools—an ocean never attempted or occupied by any barks, save only that of my father Cogitosus. But lest I should seem to make a small matter great, with little skill, from uncertain authors, with frail memory, with obliterated meaning and barbarous language, but with a most pious intention, obeying the command of thy belovedness, and sanctity, and authority, I will now attempt, out of many acts of Saint Patrick, to explain these, gathered here and there with difficulty.”<sup>1</sup>

The first biography in England of which we know the writer, “ the earliest extant historical work compiled by an Anglo-Saxon author,” is the *Life of Wilfrid*, by Eddius Stephanus, which dates from about 709. Eddius, a choir-master in Kent, was summoned by Wilfrid, Bishop of York, to assist in the organisation of church services in Northumbria. Inasmuch as Eddius spent forty years in

<sup>1</sup> Translation of James Henthorn Todd, *St. Patrick Apostle of Ireland*, p. 402. The Rev. Dr. John Gwynn has recently edited *The Book of Armagh*, Hodges, Figgis & Co., Ltd., Dublin. There is another copy of Maccu Mactheni's work preserved in a manuscript at Brussels, MS. 64, Royal Library.

the service of Wilfrid, and had at his command the personal knowledge of Bishop Acca and Abbot Tathbert, to the latter of whom Wilfrid had at one time told in full the story of his life, he was well qualified to undertake the task of biographer. His method is much more logical than that of Adamnan. He begins with the birth of Wilfrid, proceeds in chronological order to his death, and continues with details of miracles wrought by means of Wilfrid's silken robe, and of signs seen in the sky to show that Wilfrid was made equal with St. Peter and St. Andrew.

A distinct advance over the work of Adamnan is the use of letters and documents connected with the ecclesiastical controversies in which Wilfrid had a part. These letters and documents—known to us only through this biography—are used, it must be observed, not so much to throw light on the personality of the individual as to elucidate the events in which Wilfrid took part. The author had no work to which to refer, save an anonymous *Life of St. Cuthbert*, which had been written and kept at Lindisfarne. It must be said, though, that Eddius made good use of this model; for he not only borrowed the prologue, “merely altering the names,” but “in another instance . . . gives to his patron, after he becomes Bishop, the character which had been already ascribed with far more justice to Cuthbert himself.”<sup>1</sup> Canon Raine points out, however, that Eddius' work precedes that of the Venerable Bede and that the events given towards the end of the fifth book of the *Ecclesiastical History* (cap. xix.) are a summary of Eddius' *Life*. The *Life of Wilfrid*, as biography, excels that of Columba, and Eddius deserves to be regarded as “one of the leaders in the very front rank of the vanguard of English scholars.”

The work of the Venerable Bede next claims our attention.

<sup>1</sup> James Raine, *Historians of York* (Rolls Series), vol. i. p. xxxii.

Although known chiefly as an historian, Bede has a place among the biographical writers of this period by reason of his *Life of St. Cuthbert* and *Lives of the Abbots of the Monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow*. It is the prose *Life of St. Cuthbert*, written about 721, in which we are now particularly interested. Once, Bede informs us, he had written Cuthbert's life in Latin verse, a habit of which there are numerous examples scattered throughout this period. In the prose *Life*, Bede has followed the chronological order, proceeding from Cuthbert's youth to his death, and to the miracles performed by his relics. So far as the miraculous element is concerned, the narrative harks back to that of Adamnan; of the forty-six chapters, thirty-nine are concerned with miraculous events. It may, for this reason, seem that no advancement whatever had been made in regard to the use of miraculous details since Adamnan wrote of Columba. It is very evident, however, to the careful reader that whatever may have been the attitude of those who examined Bede's work with such scrupulous care<sup>1</sup> and passed all these stories without question, in the mind of Bede himself there was a doubt too strong to be entirely concealed.

In remarking on the manner in which Cuthbert was cured of a painful swelling in his knee by following the advice of an angel which appeared to him, Bede says: "And if it should seem incredible to any one, that an angel should appear on horseback, let him read the history of the Maccabees, in which it is related that angels came on horseback to the defence of Judas Maccabeus and the temple of God." And again, in relating how two crows sought by prayers and gifts to appease Cuthbert for an injury they had done to him, Bede remarks, "Nor let it

<sup>1</sup> As explained in the dedication of the *Life of St. Cuthbert* and in the preface to the *Ecclesiastical History*.

seem absurd to any one to derive a lesson of virtue from birds, since Solomon saith, 'Go to the ant, O sluggard, and consider her ways and learn wisdom.'” The Rev. Stopford A. Brooke calls our attention to the fact that when Bede “is speaking in his own person, he has no knowledge of the miraculous. When he has told the tale of Cuthbert quenching in one day a supernatural as well as a natural fire, he adds, ‘But I, and those who are like me conscious of our own weakness, can do nothing in that way against material fire.’ Again, when he speaks of the beasts and birds obeying Cuthbert—‘We, for the most part,’ he says, ‘have lost our dominion over the creation, for we neglect to obey the Lord.’ The same careful note steals sometimes into the *Ecclesiastical History*. It represents the struggle, it may be an altogether unconscious struggle, of the temper of the scholar who demands accuracy with the temper of the pious monk to whom the miraculous was so dear and so useful.”<sup>1</sup>

We see, too, in this work a yet more distinct emphasis upon the moral purpose; the *Life* is entirely a paean of praise. Bede “is fond of dwelling upon the efficacious preaching of a holy life”; the moral purpose is uppermost in his mind. Indeed, Bede has set down in the *Ecclesiastical History* (sect. 1) his opinion in regard to relating “good things of good men” and “evil things of wicked persons”: “For when history relates good things of good men, the attentive hearer is excited to imitate that which is good; or when it mentions evil things of wicked persons, nevertheless the religious and pious hearer or reader, by shunning that which is hurtful and perverse, is the more earnestly excited to perform those things which he knows to be good, and worthy of God.” This practice may be of value for the purposes of a moralist; it is scarcely the principle for a

<sup>1</sup> *History of Early English Literature*, vol. ii. p. 160.

biographer to follow who wishes to set forth a human being. The practice of relating only good things of good men was carried to such an extreme in the progress of English biography as to become a vice.

We have said that thirty-nine out of the forty-six chapters are concerned with the miraculous. From the remaining chapters we get glimpses of the man Cuthbert himself, and, from the biographical point of view, these are worth all the rest. From such passages as these we see what Bede might have done in the way of biography had he not been prevented by the spirit of the age in which he lived:

"So great moreover was Cuthbert's skill in teaching, so vast was his power of loving persuasion, so striking was the light of his angelic countenance, that no one in his presence dared to conceal from him the hidden secrets of his heart, but all declared openly in confession what each had done amiss, thinking in truth that none of his misdeeds were concealed from him."

"He was also wont to seek out and preach in those remote villages, which were situated far from the world in wild mountain places and fearful to behold, which as well by their poverty and distance up the country prevented intercourse between them and such as could instruct their inhabitants. Abandoning himself willingly to this pious work, Cuthbert cultivated these remote districts and people with so much zeal and learning, that he often did not return to his monastery for an entire week, sometimes for two or three, yea occasionally for even a full month; remaining all the time in the mountains, and calling back to heavenly concerns these rustic people, by the word of his preaching as well as by his example of virtue."<sup>1</sup>

"Now there were in the monastery certain monks who chose rather to follow their ancient custom than to obey the new rule. These, nevertheless, he overcame by the modest power of his patience, and by daily practice he brought them by little and little to a better disposition. As he frequently discoursed in the assembly of the brethren about the rule, when he might well have been wearied out with the sharp remarks of those that spoke against it, he would suddenly rise up, and dismissing the assembly with a

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<sup>1</sup> The two foregoing paragraphs are from chapter ix.

placid mind and countenance, depart. But nevertheless, on the following day, as if he had suffered no opposition the day before, he repeated the same admonitions to the same audience, until by degrees he brought them round, as we have said, to what he wished. For he was a man specially endowed with the grace of patience, and most invincible in stoutly enduring all opposition that might occur, whether to mind or body. At the same time he bore a cheerful countenance amid every distress that might happen, so that it was clearly understood that he despised outward tribulations by the inward consolations of the Holy Spirit."

"His raiment was very ordinary; and he used such moderation in this respect that he was not remarkable either for neatness or slovenliness." <sup>1</sup>

Such passages as these, together with the account of Cuthbert's illness and death, stand out in welcome relief from the mass of the miraculous.

After Bede, biography in England was continued by Felix, hermit of Crowland, in his *Life of St. Guthlac*, written between 747 and 749. The narrative is of little intrinsic worth, not differing materially from other lives of saints. It is worthy of mention here because of its connexion with English literature. Some time in the tenth or eleventh century it was translated into Old English <sup>2</sup> and no doubt furnished the material for the second part of the St. Guthlac poem attributed to Cynewulf, and thus enables us to establish the only date we have in the life of that mysterious writer.

The first biography of an English layman is the *Life of Alfred the Great*, the work of Asser, Bishop of St. David's.

<sup>1</sup> These two paragraphs from chapter xvi. The translation is that of the Rev. Joseph Stevenson in *The Church Historians of England*, vol. i. part ii.

<sup>2</sup> Wanley ascribed the Old English prose translation of the *Vita Guthlaci* (MS. Cott. Vesp. D. xxi.) to Aelfric. C. W. Goodwin, who published an edition in 1848, says: "The *Life of St. Guthlac*, hermit of Crowland, was originally written in Latin, by one Felix, of whom nothing is with certainty known. . . . When and by whom the translation was made is unknown: the style is not that of Aelfric, to whom it has been groundlessly ascribed."

Asser became acquainted with Alfred about 884 and enjoyed an intimate friendship with the King until 893, in which year the *Life* was written. There is nothing to show that Asser ever continued the narrative beyond the year 893, and since Alfred survived until 901, Asser's work has the interest of contemporaneous composition. Asser had a great man as subject, yet he fails markedly as a biographer, even when we take into consideration the primitive stage of life-writing. He "seems never to have realised to himself the honour to which he had attained in being selected to become the channel through which posterity should be made acquainted with the outer and inner life of 'England's darling.'" <sup>1</sup> The author seems to have had in mind no definite plan; the work is lacking entirely in artistic skill. The whole is a remarkable conglomeration of history and biography, a weaving together in loose fashion of the Saxon Chronicle and the results of Asser's own acquaintance and observation.

One cannot refrain from smiling at many of Asser's whimsical methods. Thus, he naïvely traces Alfred's genealogy back to Adam; frequently drags in utterly irrelevant material; and otherwise rambles on knowingly and, to all intents, wilfully. His style is rhetorical and verbose; he "gives one the impression that the author thought more of the display of his powers of composition and command of recondite words than of the matter conveyed by them. Sometimes, it is true, he shows a tendency to excessive explanation, but more often his meaning is obscured by a cloud of verbiage." <sup>2</sup> He is perhaps the most hopeless Rambler of the period: he seems to regard Alfred as a thread on which to string whatever stories came to his fancy. He is aware of the fact, too, as these passages prove:

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, vol. ii. part ii. p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. Stevenson, *Asser*, p. lxxxix.



“ And now, to use nautical language, I will no longer commit my vessel to the winds and waves, and, putting out to sea, steer a roundabout course through the massacres of war and the enumeration of years, but must return to the object which first stirred me up to this undertaking. I must now treat, as far as I have obtained information, of the infancy and boyhood of my venerated master, Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons, as briefly and as fully as I possibly can.”

It is not long until he has once more left the subject in hand, to which he thus returns:

“ With the view of returning to the point from which I digressed, and that I may not be compelled by long navigation to miss the port of my wished-for repose, I will hasten to give some account, as far as my knowledge will allow, of the life and manners, of the just conversation, and of the greater part of the exploits, of Alfred, my Lord, the King of the Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>1</sup>

With all its defects, the work is of great value. It throws much light on a dark period of English history, a period known to us only by the Saxon Chronicle and a “ few charters preserved in much later chartularies, of a more or less suspicious nature.” Mr. W. H. Stevenson is of the opinion that “ probably no work of similar extent has contributed so much to English history. At an early period it was transcribed almost entirely into the continuous chronicles of Florence of Worcester and Simeon of Durham, and by their means it descended to Royer of Howden and the St. Alban’s school of writers, whose influence upon mediaeval history-writing in England was all-pervading.”<sup>2</sup> As biography, it stands in strong contrast to the lives of the saints, overburdened as they are with stories of the miraculous. It shows too, especially in the second portion drawn chiefly from Asser’s personal knowledge, a nearer approach to modern biography than anything else of the period: it shows an appreciation of the personal anecdote

<sup>1</sup> Translation of Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, vol. ii. part ii.

<sup>2</sup> Asser, p. xi.

that is promising, and a willingness to consider a man from the human point of view that is wholesome. One feels after reading the entire narrative that one has been in the presence of a human being. It is worthy of notice, also, that the work is not purposely or mainly a panegyric.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Memorials of St. Dunstan*, edited by William Stubbs, there are preserved six lives of Dunstan, by different writers, covering the period from about 1000 to 1464. One of the lives was written within sixteen years, another within twenty-three years of Dunstan's death. The two are dedicated to his successors, personal friends who knew him either in the capacity of fellow scholars or of disciples. Dunstan was an Anglo-Saxon bishop of the highest type, the close friend and the chief minister of Edgar, "around whose name the last glories of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms circle." It is not because the *Memorials of St. Dunstan* exhibit any marked development in the history of the biography of the period that we include a notice of them here. It is rather because, "for the history of England in the latter half of the tenth century we have, except the very meagre notices of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, no contemporary materials, unless we admit the lives of the Saints of the Benedictine revival. Florence of Worcester, writing within fifty years of the Conquest, could find nothing to add to the details of the Chronicle for this period, except the notices of Dunstan drawn directly from the biographies of the saint. The light which they shed is not great, but it is precious in proportion to its scantiness."<sup>2</sup>

We close the consideration of this period with the

<sup>1</sup> "The purpose of the biography of a great man is in part that of inciting others to follow his example. But in the present work there is no reason to consider that the didactic character is other than incidental, or that it was written with any other purpose than that of celebrating the doings and recording the life of a truly great man."—Stevenson, *Asser*, cviii-cix.

<sup>2</sup> William Stubbs, *Memorials of St. Dunstan* (Rolls Series), p. ix.

earliest of the various lives of the Venerable Bede, a work by an unknown writer produced some time before 1104. The narrative adds nothing to our stock of information about Bede; it is but a repetition and amplification in high-flown language<sup>1</sup> of Bede's autobiographical sketch at the close of the *Ecclesiastical History*. It seems worth while, however, to give it a place here, as in a way marking the end of this period; for, while it, too, is panegyric, it shows an entire absence of the miraculous. The writer treats of Bede as a holy man, to be sure, but not as a man who wrought miracles at every turn. Of course, narratives of the miraculous in the lives of holy men continued to be written long after this date: that there are none mentioned in the life of so great a man as Bede, written thus early, is significant.<sup>2</sup> An epoch all but closes with this narrative.

It is not difficult to find the influences which inspired and shaped the writings of these earliest biographers. Inasmuch as all of them were churchmen, it is in the literature of the Church that they found their models. The works abound in references to the Scriptures and the Church Fathers. Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert* reminds one of the Gospel narratives. The resemblance of the prologue of the *Life of St. Patrick* by Muirchu Maccu Mactheni to that of St. Luke's Gospel has already been pointed out. Asser seems to have gone further afield; W. H. Stevenson shows

<sup>1</sup> This may be given as an example of the style: "And thus this eminent wise bee of the Church, thirsting for that sweetness that is grateful to God, gathered flowers all over the field that the Lord had blessed, with which, making honey, as it were, by the alchemy of wisdom, he indited compositions that are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

<sup>2</sup> "Alcuin gives an account of a miracle wrought by Bede's relics. De Sanctis Ebor. vv. 1316-7. With this exception what Fuller says of him is true: 'Saxon Saints who had not the tenth part of his sanctity, nor hundredth part of his learning, are said to have wrought miracles *ad lectoris nauseam*; not one single miracle is reported to have been done by Bede.'"—C. Plummer, *Bædæ Opera Historica*, Tomus i. p. lxxix, note.

that he was familiar with Einhard's *Life of Charles the Great*,<sup>1</sup> and suggests that he may also have taken as models Thegan's *Life of Ludwig the Pious* and a *Life of Ludwig* by an unknown author described as the "Astronomer." For the most part, however, the work of the Latin period began and proceeded without appreciable foreign influence other than what came through ecclesiastical channels. Plutarch's *Lives* were unknown to the men of this period in Britain: the earliest Latin version was printed only in 1470; the first edition of the original text was not published until 1517.

After one has completed an examination of the literature of this period, one is first of all impressed with the scant attention given to man as man; such sketches as are given are rather in the way of outward events; the inner life is passed over as of little importance; the individual is subordinated to institutions.<sup>2</sup> It is not to be wondered at that so little is said of the man and that so much is recorded of the work and of the Church; men were supposed to sink their identity into that of the institution. The Church and its work were the important matters; man was only an instrument; his life was not to be held dear. It is worth while, also, to bear in mind the circle for which these memorials were written: they were addressed to churchmen to whom other churchmen were daily companions; to men who were overcome by the brightness of God's glory

<sup>1</sup> ". . . there is evidence that he was acquainted with the greatest of the Frankish biographies, the *Life of Charles the Great* by Einhard. In c. 73 he adapts to his own purpose the language of the preface of this famous work, and in the following chapters we can perceive some indications that the order of his biographical matter has been influenced by that in Einhard." Mr. Stevenson goes on to say that Asser is much more accurate in historical details than is Einhard. He calls Einhard's *Life* "a medley of phrases culled from Suetonius"; and says that "it abounds with chronological errors."—*Asser*, Introduction, sect. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Doctor Reeves laments that Adamnan did not write the history of his Church rather than the *Life of St. Columba*.—*Life of St. Columba*, Preface, p. xx.

and the light from the New Jerusalem. The recognition of the individual which was later to make English biography a thing of living and personal literary importance came far later.

Writing in 1853, the Rev. Joseph Stevenson, in regretting the fact that no contemporary life of the Venerable Bede has reached us, said: "This deficiency in our early literature did not arise from any ignorance on the part of his contemporaries respecting the merits of Bede, or from any unwillingness to acknowledge them with due respect and reverence. . . . We must therefore look elsewhere for the reasons for this apparent neglect; nor will it be difficult to find them. They arise from the character of the historian's life, which passed without the occurrence of any of those incidents which afford the chief scope for the exercise of the biographer's occupation. Had a life of Bede been written by a contemporary, it would almost necessarily have been scanty, even to meagreness; and although we might have possessed definite information upon many points which are at present obscure, yet in all probability we should not have been gainers to the extent which at first might be anticipated. These remarks, let it be remembered, apply only to the external incidents of his life. Had he possessed a biographer enabled, by circumstances and kindred feeling, to record his conversation and the tone and character of his mind, to furnish us with the picture of his every-day occupations, as he was at study in the cell, or at prayer in the Church, and to admit us to the communion with his spirit as his days passed in the retirement of the monastery, this indeed would have been a treasure."

"Yet," Mr. Stevenson continues, "we scarcely have a right to expect such a document. Bede was, in his own time, no prominent character. . . . However much, therefore, we may lament the absence of an early biography of Bede,

we ought not to be surprised at this omission. There was not much to record beyond his birth and his death, his prayers and his labours. He did not, like St. Guthlac, retire into the wilderness, and wage war with the evil spirits by which it was haunted. He did not, like St. Cuthbert, lay aside the bishop's robe for the hermit's cowl, and exchange the splendour of a court for the solitude of a rocky island. He did not, like St. Columbanus, carry the reputation of his native church into foreign countries, and establish monasteries which should vie with each other in recording the history of their founder. He did not, like St. Wilfrid of York, plead his cause before kings and synods, and strive, through all opposition, to raise the ecclesiastical power above the secular authority. He did not, like St. Wilbrord and St. Willibald, preach Christianity among the heathen, and leave home and kindred for the extension of the everlasting gospel. Had he done any of these things he would, most probably, have found a biographer; but his life presented no such salient points, and it was unrecorded."<sup>1</sup>

We have to see in the following chapters how long the notion prevailed that unless a man had taken part in great events his life was not considered worthy of detailed record. In other words, we must follow the course of biography until it frees itself from the entanglements of history. We must see how biography changed from a mere *curriculum vitae* to "the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life." It was only as biography changed from mere narrative to such portraiture that it became truly literature.

<sup>1</sup> *The Church Historians of England*, vol. i. part ii. Preface, pp. i-ii.

## CHAPTER II

## THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION AND PREPARATION (1066-1500)

THE years lying between 1066 and 1500 constitute a transition period as well in the development of the English language and nation, and of history, as in that of English biography. The transition period itself divides into two: the one extending from 1066 to about 1200; the second continuing from 1200 to about 1500. These dates are, of course, not arbitrary; they but represent, in a way, limits which overlap and merge into one another almost imperceptibly. During the first of these divisions, the Normans slowly reduced the Saxon population to complete submission, while the genius of the Anglo-Saxon language was permeating the language of the Norman conquerors and slowly shaping itself to be the vehicle of thought-expression of the greater Britain of the future. The second division witnessed the ascendancy of the English tongue, the liberation of history from the thralldom of the credulous imagination of the tales of miracle and wonder, and the rise of conditions which made possible a kind of biography distinctly in advance of anything which had previously been known in the British Isles. So far as they contribute directly to the purpose of this volume, the four centuries may be quickly summarised.

The period from 1066 to 1200 is rather distinctly marked. The purely Anglo-Saxon influence which preceded it rapidly declined, ending with the close of the Saxon Chronicle in 1154. Beginning with the date of the Norman Conquest and ending in 1199 with the reign of Richard I., the literature

of the country "may be considered purely historical in comparison with any other period included in the middle ages. Saints' lives, legends, and miracles . . . now become comparatively rare; and if they do not disappear altogether before the increasing historical spirit of the age, they cease to be the exclusive sources of information for the historical inquirer."<sup>1</sup> It was at this time that William of Malmesbury came forward to put new life into the writing of history, "the first English writer after the time of Bede who attempted successfully to raise history above the dry and undigested details of a chronicle."<sup>2</sup> Of William of Malmesbury, a modern English historian asserts that "we may fairly claim for him the credit of being the first writer after Bede who attempted to give to his details of dates and events such a systematic connexion, in the way of cause and consequence, as entitles them to the name of history. . . . He prides himself, and with some reason, on his skill in the delineation of character"<sup>3</sup> His *Gesta Pontificorum Anglorum* has been pronounced "the foundation of the early ecclesiastical history of England on which all writers have chiefly relied."<sup>4</sup> These statements must be taken with due regard to the age of which they are spoken. They do not mean that history, as we understand it to-day, sprang full-fledged into being at this time; they mean simply that the line of demarcation is here drawn; that the dawn of better things is at hand. Such improvement as is thus indicated extends, of course, to the more strictly biographic narratives of this time.

During this interval, the stream of biographical writing

<sup>1</sup> Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, vol. ii. p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Biographica Britannica Literaria*, vol. ii. p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Stubbs, *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi de Gestis Regum Anglorum* (Rolls Series), vol. i. p. x.

<sup>4</sup> N. E. S. A. Hamilton, *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis de Gestis Pontificum Anglorum* (Rolls Series), pp. ix-x.



ran on in somewhat the same fashion as before 1066; that is, the language continued to be Latin, and the writers, churchmen; the authors recorded notices only of those prominent in Church or State; and, while professedly treating of individuals, gave not so much a personal account as a record of outward events. By those who are considering the development of biography, the great mass of such narratives as were produced during this first half of the transition period may be passed over unnoticed. Here, again, these writings are of value chiefly to the historian. As before, we need select only such as seem to stand out from the mass as marking advance.

Eadmer in his *Life of Anselm*, completed by 1140, enters somewhat carefully into the details of Anselm's boyhood and shows an appreciation of the human qualities of the subject of his memoir. "The chroniclers of those days," remarks R. W. Church, "were not in the habit of going back to a man's first days; they were satisfied with taking him when he began to make himself known and felt in the world. It is a point of more than ordinary interest as regards Anselm, that we have some authentic information about the times when no one cared about him. He had the fortune to have a friend who was much with him in his later life . . . who, more than most of his contemporaries among literary monks, was alive to points of character. Eadmer . . . saw something else worth recording in his great archbishop besides the public passages of his life and his supposed miracles. He observed and recorded what Anselm was as a man."<sup>1</sup> In an age when most writers thought "the getting possession of the tooth of a saint of more importance than such events" it is hopeful to find a writer like Eadmer.

William of Malmesbury's chief contributions to biography

<sup>1</sup> *Saint Anselm*, pp. 7-8.

are his *Life of St. Aldhelm*, written before 1125, and his *Life of St. Wulstan (Wulfstan)*, Bishop of Worcester, dating from about 1140.<sup>1</sup> The latter is based on an earlier but no longer existent *Life* by Coleman, a monk of Worcester and Prior of Westbury. The career of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, attracted the attention of many of his own and the following generation. Worthy of mention here is the *Life* by Becket's clerk, William Fitz-Stephen; that by John of Salisbury, with its supplement by Alan of Tewkesbury; and the long, rambling *Life* by Herbert of Bosham. "Herbert is, indeed, one of the most provoking of authors. Instead of being content to tell an intelligible story, he continually digresses into long discourses which are quite beside the subject, and in themselves are mere nothingness; and when he has tried the reader's patience with tedious superfluities of this kind, he often spends a further space in vindicating his diffuseness, and in telling us that we ought to be thankful for it."<sup>2</sup> Becket was murdered in 1170. Within sixteen years after his death the lives here mentioned had been written, that by Herbert being most certainly completed by 1186.

The most pretentious of such narratives, however, is what is known as the *Magna Vita*, the *Great Life*, of Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, the work of Adam, Abbot of Eynsham, near Oxford, written between 1212 and 1220. In the Rolls Series edition<sup>3</sup> the *Magna Vita* occupies 378 large pages. Adam was a close personal friend of Hugh, knowing him so well, in fact, that Mr. Dimock says "we may look upon

<sup>1</sup> The *Life of St. Aldhelm* may be found in Gale's *Scriptores Rerum Anglicarum*, vol. iii.; in Wharton's *Anglia Sacra*, vol. ii.; and in Hamilton's *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* (Rolls Series). The *Wulstan* may be found in *Anglia Sacra*, vol. ii. pp. 241-70.

<sup>2</sup> James Craigie Robertson, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket* (Rolls Series), vol. iii. pp. xxiii-iv.

<sup>3</sup> *Magna Vita St. Hugonis Episcopi Lincolnensis*, edited by James F. Dimock.

much of what this volume [the *Magna Vita*] contains, it seems strongly to me, almost as if it had been penned by Hugh's own hand." The Rev. George G. Perry, who, in his *St. Hugh of Lincoln*, made thorough use of the work of Adam, speaks of "the rich, full, and varied details of the *Magna Vita*"; and yet, he continues, "it can . . . hardly be said that the writer . . . has left us, in the strict sense, a life of Hugh. The outlines of his earlier life are preserved, and the events of the few last years are pretty fully given, but for the ten or twelve years which followed after his elevation to the episcopate very little is supplied." It is worthy of note that the writer of the *Magna Vita* emphasises the man rather than the work of the man. Adam "treats the subject of his memoir altogether from the point of view of the saint, and scarce gives us any information as to his connexion with the public events of his day. . . . Hugh was not a statesman. He shrank altogether from secular affairs, and loved better to be cleaning the scuttles at Witham, than to be taking his place in the Curia Regis. There is, therefore, much more to say of his inner life than of his outer."<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, however, there could be no such thing as a "*Life*," in the strict sense of the word, at this early date, nor for many centuries.

In common with everything else of the kind that had been written up until 1200, the *Magna Vita* is panegyric. The author exhibits a too eager desire to make everything

<sup>1</sup> Perry, *St. Hugh of Lincoln*, p. 253. Cf. also what Herbert Thurston, S.J., says: "Of all our mediaeval saints, there is not one in whom the man, as distinct from the bishop or the ruler, is so intimately known to us. Even St. Thomas of Canterbury, or St. Anselm, are spectral and shadowy figures in comparison. Hugh, thanks to the memoirs of his Benedictine chaplain, stands before us in flesh and blood. Despite its rather involved Latin, and its discursive style, the Life of the Saint known as the *Magna Vita* has left us a portrait superior for truth and vividness even to the sketch of his contemporary, Abbot Samson, in the Chronicle of Jocelin de Brakelond.—*The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*, p. vi.

redound to the "honour" of St. Hugh. "He has no doubt," remarks Mr. Perry, "drawn his hero as somewhat too perfect, but this we may readily excuse. Contrasted with most other writers of the Lives of Saints, he stands well. He exhibits far more traces of humanity than are to be found in most of them."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we may say that the diminution in the record of the miraculous is remarkable. Hugh himself was no lover of the miraculous, looking upon the craving after miracles as evidence of want of faith. This attitude no doubt influenced his biographer strongly; at any rate, in the long narrative of the *Magna Vita* there are only nine references to miraculous events. The work stands, therefore, in line with the anonymous *Life of Bede* as illustrative of the change of temper in the minds of men towards the working of Providence in human affairs. From this time forth—although allowing the error to revive at times in strange ways—men were steadily freeing themselves of the shackles of superstition; were slowly groping towards the method of scientific investigation, calm reason, and accurate observation and recording. "And as the obscure mists of the legendary period disappear, and the steady light of facts dawns upon the grateful reader, so in the artless, unsystematic, and sometimes ill-arranged and confused narratives and chronicles of the eleventh and the following century we seem to trace an era of intellectual progress when the mind of Europe had not yet been trained in the schools, and the great questions which agitated mankind had not yet been submitted to logical analysis and arrangement. The faculty of wonder and its attendant habit of exaggeration, natural to an early stage in the national life and its conversion from barbarism to Chris-

<sup>1</sup> "The great life of St. Hugh is one of the most bright and fresh of all the bright saint-lives of the Middle Ages."—William Holden Hutton, *The English Saints* (Bampton Lectures, 1903), p. 213.

tianity, gave way before the steadier observance of facts forced upon men by their altered position, by their new relations to the Continent, by the active duties and outdoor life imposed upon them, by the exigencies and demands of feudalism. But observation rose for the present to no higher grade than to a careful collection of historical facts and documents, and was itself to give place, in its turn, to the new habits of generalisation and deduction which observation itself had helped to produce.”<sup>1</sup>

The second half of this period of transition—the three hundred years lying between 1200 and 1500—constitutes a time of almost entire suspense in the production of biographical narrative. These were the centuries of preparation for biography in the English language. They were centuries fraught with great consequences. The English language was slowly shaping itself for use, superseding the Norman French tongue in the law courts in 1362. From 1381 onwards, translations of the Bible in English were exerting a deep influence upon the establishing of the language, and upon modes of thought and manner of writing. Chaucer, the one brilliant literary light of the period, arose, and taking the language of his day, showed how effective it could be as an instrument of poetical narration. Men were gaining larger conceptions of life and liberty, winning for themselves between 1215 and 1225 rights typified by the Magna Charta. Britain was ceasing to be insular; the outlook was no longer merely from the cloister: the Crusades had brought in new influences; and, most of all, the discovery of America in 1492 opened wide the gates of the world. The wars by means of which the nation was shaping itself, as well as the great discoveries of new regions, made the period one of interest in events rather than in men, and biography as a business there could not be, until there came

<sup>1</sup> Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, vol. ii. pp. ix-x.

an overwhelming interest in men. Most of the literature of the period was objective rather than subjective.

One work dating from the last portion of the fifteenth century attracts attention because of the extensive use of the personal anecdote. The author, John Blakman (Blakeman, or Blackman), may well be given the credit of being the first to appreciate the value of the personal anecdote. We know little more of Blakman (*f.* 1436-48) than that he was admitted a fellow of Merton College, Oxford, in 1436, and that his position as fellow of Eton brought him into close personal relations with Henry VI. From his own knowledge, as well as from information gained through those in attendance upon the sovereign, Blakman wrote a brief collection of anecdotes illustrative of the virtues of Henry VI.<sup>1</sup> Under such headings as *Devota habitudo ejus in ecclesia*, *Pudicitia ejus*, *Humilitas regis*, and *Pietas et patientia ejus*, Blakman proceeds to develop what is in truth a catalogue of virtues amounting to a public testimonial or recommendation. It is indeed claimed that the work was composed to advance Henry VII.'s project of canonising Henry VI. We know that Henry VII. petitioned this canonisation of three popes in succession, Innocent VIII. (1484-92); Alexander VI. (1492-1503); and Julius II. (1508-13). "Blakman's apotheosis was doubtless intended to prepare the public mind for this step."<sup>2</sup> One of the best of Blakman's anecdotes is that which relates how Henry, in company with a number of his nobles and attendants, was confronted at Cripplegate with the mutilated body of a traitor set upon a stake. When the King

<sup>1</sup> *Collectarium Mansuetudinum et Bonorum Morum Regis Henrici VI., ex collectione Magistri Joannis Blakman bacchalaurei theologiae, et post Cartusiae monachi Londini.* First printed in Thomas Hearne's *Duo Rerum Anglicarum*, Oxford, 1732, pp. 285-307.

<sup>2</sup> I. S. Leadam, *Dictionary of National Biography*, article "John Blakman."

learned whose body it was, and why it was exposed there, he immediately ordered that it be taken away, with the remark, "I am unwilling that any Christian should be so cruelly treated because of me." But it is well to have the story in Blakman's own words: "Primo, cum semel descenderet à villa sancti Albani Londinias per Crepylgate, videns supra portam ibi quartarium hominis positum super sudem sublimen, quaesivit, quid hoc esset? Et respondentibus sibi dominis suis, quod erat IIII. pars cujusdam proditoris sui, qui falsus fuerat regiae majestati, ait rex, *Auferatur. Nolo enim aliquem Christianum tam crudeliter pro me tractari*, & continuo sublatum est quartarium. Qui hoc vidit, testimonium dicit." The first ten centuries in the course of English biography produced only too few with such a sense as that of Blakman's for the little but revealing incidents of character.

None of the narratives mentioned in either this chapter or in the one preceding could exert much influence on the actual development of biography, for the simple reason that they were not widely circulated. They existed only in the form of manuscripts slowly and laboriously copied by hand, and circulated among a limited number, all of whom belonged to the same class as did the producers of the works. None of them were printed until long after they were first composed. The *Magna Vita* of St. Hugh was not printed in full until 1864; its very length prevented it from being duplicated to any extent in its own day. This was true of all such narratives until the invention of printing.

About 1476, William Caxton set up the first English printing press in a spot close to Westminster Abbey and thus began the work which was ultimately to make all kinds of English writing the common heritage of the people. Before the end of the fifteenth century the earliest paper-mill in England was established at Stevenage, in Hertford-

shire, affording the means for a cheap multiplication of books. Edward IV. and his brothers encouraged the art of printing and helped to make it possible for the literature of the Renaissance and the thoughts of the rising Reformation to mould the minds and hearts of the nation to a new appreciation of human life and of human individuality.

Nothing bears witness to the carelessness of the men of the period in regard to life records more than the conspicuous absence of materials for a biography of Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer was not only a poet; he was also a courtier, closely connected with the political life of his time. Beyond the merest records of outward events, however, and most of these collected in modern times, we have nothing from which to attempt to reconstruct his life. "The study of Chaucer's life may be divided into two periods, that of the legend, and that of the appeal to fact. The first period extends from Leland to Nicolas, the second from Nicolas to the Life-Records gathered by the Chaucer Society, and subsequently. . . . The work of killing the legend has, however, been difficult."<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is that the four centuries clearly constitute a period of transition and preparation. The succeeding period will be much influenced by its predecessor; the new will be a period of gradual loosening of the old habits of thought and methods of writing, and a slow breaking away from the influence of the Latin language. When next we meet with biography written for the first time in the national language, we shall find that it is almost a beginning *de novo*.

<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual*, p. 1. See also Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, *passim*.



## CHAPTER III

## ENGLISH VERSE LIVES

CONTEMPORANEOUSLY with the prose lives of saints there was produced a vast number of such lives in verse. These constitute an interesting stage in the progress of hagiology; in fact, apart from accounts of the lives and miracles of saints, very few biographical narratives in verse, of any sort, exist, whether in Latin or English. We have already remarked Bede's reference to his *Life of St. Cuthbert*, written in Latin verse, and have observed that a number of other such Latin verse lives are extant. All that has been said in connexion with the prose lives in regard to the questions of authorship and authenticity applies with equal force to these kindred verse narratives. The work of the Early English Text Society has done much to render accessible the most important of these lives; it remains true, however, that only a beginning has been made—the work of publishing and of reducing to order the whole mass is yet before English scholars.<sup>1</sup> From such a quantity of anonymous writing—for usually the patient monks who composed, re-composed, copied, and re-copied these lives

<sup>1</sup> A recent (1915) statement of the Early English Text Society calls attention to this fact: "The subscribers to the Original series must be prepared for the issue of the whole of the Early English *Lives of the Saints* sooner or later. The standard collection of saints' lives in the Corpus and Ashmole MSS., the Harleian MS. 2277, etc., will repeat the Laud set, our No. 87, with additions and in right order. The foundation MS. Laud 108 had to be printed first to prevent quite unwieldy collations. The supplementary lives from the Vernon and other MSS. will form one or two separate volumes."

laboured, died, and "gave no sign" of their own individuality—the names of only a few authors emerge to satisfy our curiosity, and of these, little is known. They flit across the pages of history like shadows out of the past.

Through the medium of Aelfric (*fl.* 1006) the habit of writing verse lives was carried over into Old English. His *Lives of Saints*, a set of sermons on Saints' Days formerly observed by the English Church, are written in a loose sort of alliterative verse, so loose that Professor Skeat agrees that "those who prefer to consider the text as being all equally in prose can do so by disregarding the division into lines," although he affirms that "in most of the narratives some attempt at embellishment is very evident."<sup>1</sup>

Robert of Gloucester (*fl.* 1260–1300), whose *Chronicle* has gained for him a place in English literature, has been half-heartedly credited with the authorship of a number of verse lives in Early English. Among others which have been assigned to him are those of St. Alban, St. Augustine, St. Birin, and St. Aldhelm. These are written in the same kind of rhyming verse as the *Chronicle*, and while we may agree that arbitrarily to assign the authorship of them to him on this account alone would be practically to affirm that at the end of the thirteenth century only Robert of Gloucester could write such verse, we need not for this reason deprive him of the honour of authorship of what, after all, he may have written.<sup>2</sup> It is well to remember in addition, that the form of Robert of Gloucester's work, to which Dr. W. Aldis Wright refers as "doggerel verse in

<sup>1</sup> See E.E.T.S. No. 76, Original Series (1881).

<sup>2</sup> ". . . a bulky collection of saints' lives, immensely popular, constantly rehandled, altered, and added to—the work, doubtless, in all their forms put together of a very large number of writers, but in some of the earliest cases at least very probably, if not almost certainly, Robert's."—Saintsbury, *History of English Prosody*, vol. i. pp. 67–8.

ballad metre," marks a distinct advance in the development of English metre.<sup>1</sup>

The two centuries following Robert of Gloucester supply four names worthy of mention. The voluminous John Lydgate (1370?–1451?), who wrought in many fields, and who has been credited with introducing the legendary epic into English literature, produced a number of saints' lives in verse. Of these, the shorter and more compact *Saint Margaret* is superior to the long, poorly told *St. Edmund and Fremund*. Osbern Bokenham, or Bokenam (1393–1447?) wrote in verse the lives of a number of female saints and thus earned for himself an almost unique place in Early English literature.<sup>2</sup> John Capgrave (1393–1464), Prior of the Austin Friary at Lynn, Norfolk, wrote the *Life of St. Katharine of Alexandria* at great length; the five books into which it is divided comprise more than eight thousand lines. Henry Bradshaw (*d.* 1513), "sometyme monke in Chester," translated "out of latine in English rude and vyle" a legend, which, "amended with many an ornate style," became known as the *Life of St. Werburge of Chester*. After Bradshaw there is little to record. We are, with him, drawing near to the age of Shakespeare. Other interests are beginning to absorb the attention of men. The verse lives of saints are nearing the time of eclipse.

From such an array, it is difficult to select examples. Quotation scarcely does justice to the longer lives, such as Lydgate's *Margaret* and *Edmund and Fremund*, or Cap-

<sup>1</sup> See Wright, *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester* (Rolls Series), vol. i. p. xxxix: and Saintsbury, *History of English Prosody*, vol. i. pp. 67–9.

<sup>2</sup> "Twice in the earlier English (and no other) literature was an attempt made to put together the lives of female saints: by Bokenham in verse, and in the present collection [*The Lives of Women Saints of our Countrie of England*, in prose]—a peculiar instance of the veneration which the weaker part of mankind, especially its godlike members, enjoys in this island."—E.E.T.S. No. 86, Original Series.

grave's *St. Katharine*. These should be read at length by those who wish to gain a notion of their manner and quality. Most of the verse lives, however, are comparatively brief, and written in a style so manifestly similar that the reading of one or two will give a fair notion of the rest. We may, then, choose two which commemorate great names in early British church annals—that of Saint Cuthbert, the rigid ascetic, yet tender-hearted ecclesiastic of the North; and that of Saint Alban, commonly known as the proto-martyr of Britain.

The *Life of St. Cuthbert* from which these excerpts are taken is anonymous.<sup>1</sup> The opening lines plunge at once into the story of the miraculous announcement to Cuthbert that he was destined to become a great man in the Church:

“ Seint Cuthbert was bore: here in ingelond.  
 God dide for him fair meracle: as ze schul understond  
 Whil he was a zong child: in his eiȝtenpe zere.  
 Wip childre he pleide at pe bal: pat his felawis were.  
 pere cam forþ a lite child: him pouȝte pre zer old.  
 A swete creatur and a fair: it was mylde and bold.”

Cuthbert took no notice of the warning to “thinke not on sich idil games,” and

“ po pis zonge child seigh: pat he his reed for sok.  
 A doun he fel to pe ground: and gret dol to him tok.  
 It began to wepe sore: and his handis to wringe.  
 pese childre hadden dol of him: & bi lesten here pleienge.”

Cuthbert now began to perceive that the “swete fair creature” was an angel, and from it he received the assurance that he was to be made “an hed of holi churche.” Turning at once from his game-playing, Cuthbert entered upon a life of serious study and devotion. In a most succinct manner, the anonymous writer follows the course of

<sup>1</sup> The version given is that of MS. Tanner 17 (Bodleian), ff. 42b-43, dating from the fifteenth century. It contains 108 lines in all.

Cuthbert's life to his elevation to the bishopric of Durham, from which point the narrative hurries to its close:

“ þo oure lordis wille was: þer after it gan falle  
 þat þe bischop of dorham deide: as we ichul don alle  
 Men wente & toke seint cuthbert: & made him bischop þere  
 His bischopriche he kepte wel: & wel þe folk gan lere  
 þo was it to-forþe brozht: þat þe angil him er seide  
 þat he schulde ben hed of holi chirche: as at þe bal he pleide  
 þo he hadde longe serued god: aftir him he sente  
 So þat in þe moneþ of march: out of þis world he wente  
 To þe hize ioye of heuene: gode lete us also  
 And þoru þe bone of seint cuthbert: bringe us alle þerto.”

The *Life of St. Alban*, which is brief enough to be given in full, is one of the narratives ascribed to Robert of Gloucester. Its ninety-eight lines are confined almost entirely to telling the story of what has come to be styled the first British martyrdom. The narrative of Alban's hiding a persecuted Christian fugitive, and of his own conversion through watching the prayers of this outcast; of the cruel punishment that “shame it was to see”; of the death “up the hill on high”—all this makes an irresistible appeal, an appeal the pathos of which is heightened by the quaint language and verse. We can well understand how, in an age which gave birth to so many legends of the miraculous, such stories as this found eager readers; and may well feel sure that the quaint verse, which has not yet lost its flavour, made a sure appeal to those who read for themselves, or listened to others read:

“ Seyn Albon þe holi mon: was her of engelonde  
 Imartred he was uor godes loue: þoru our lordes sonde  
 Heþene man he was uerst: & of heþene he com  
 & seþþe as our lord it wolde: he tornde to christendom  
 þe luper prince þat was þo: dioclitian  
 & þe oþer þat was luper ek: þat hit maximian  
 Cristenemen þat hi miȝte iwite: hi broȝte alle to grounde  
 & let hem seche in ech londe: war hi miȝte be ifounde

A justice þat was wip hem: to engelonde com·  
 To martri alle cristenemen: & destruze cristendom·  
 A clerç a good cristenemon: hurde telle wide·  
 Of tormens þat oþere hadde: he ne dorste no leng abide·  
 Ac flei to hude him ellesware: þat he imartred nere·  
 To St. Albones hous he com: & bad him in pere·  
 St. Albon þo he was wip him: awaitede & isay  
 Hou he was in orisouns: boþe nyzt & dai·  
 Him pozte þat he was a fol: þat he was heþene so longe·  
 He bigon to leue on ihesu crist: & cristendom auonge·  
 þe justice let þen clerç seche: so þat it was ikud·  
 Hou at Albones hous: wip him he was ihud·  
 Knyztes he sende him to vetch: gif he ifounde were·  
 Hi come & escece Albon: wer eny such were pere·  
 ze uor gode quap þis oþer: i ne him nozt uorsake·  
 A such man as ich am mysulf: i nele zou non oþer take·  
 A þef queþe þis luþer men: artou icome herto·  
 Wen þu wolt as a strong þef: to deþe þu worst ido·  
 þis holi mon hi bounde uaste: & to þe justice him brozte·  
 & tolde him hou he pulte him uorþ: uor þe oþer þat hi sozte·  
 Bel amy quap þe justice: sei wat is þi name·  
 & of wat kunne þu art icome: þat dost oure godes schame·  
 To þis demaunde quap St. Albon: ichulle ansuere sone·  
 Of wat kunne icham icome: þu hast lute to done·  
 Albon is my name iwis: & ic honore also·  
 God þat made al þat is: & euermore wole do·  
 A traitour quap þe justice: artou icome herto·  
 Ic schal tormenti al þi bodi: fram toppe to þe to·  
 Hastou ihud atom þen þef: þat doþ ous such schame·  
 & ipult uorþ þi sulue: wreche in his name·  
 Honoure oure godes ic þe rede: & do hem sacrifice·  
 Oþer ichulle þe tormenti: þat men schulle of þe agrise·  
 Uor þu specst quap St. Albon: þeraboute þu spillest breþ·  
 I nele neuer þen deuel honoure: uor drede of þi deþ·  
 Wrop was þe justice po: þis holi mon he nom·  
 Naked he let him uaste bynde: & zaf sone is dom·  
 Wip scourges is tormentors: leide on him inowe·  
 So uaste þat hi weri were: & al is bodi to drowe·  
 þe harde knottes·gonne deþe: in is flesch wade·  
 þe more þat hi him bete: þe gladdore hi him made·  
 þo þe luþer justice isai: þat it was al uor nozt·  
 þat he ne mihte fram ihesu crist: uor noþing torne is pozt  
 He let him lede wippoute toun: & is heued smyte of sone·

þe tormentors all ȝare were: uorte don is bone·  
 Hi harlede him so vilich: þat schame it was to se·  
 Uorte hi come to þulke stude: þere he scholde imartred be·  
 To an urnynge broke hi com: þere hi moste on wade·  
 þe tormentors wode on abrod: & no strenþe ne made·  
 þo þis holi mon þuder com: þat water him wiþ drou·  
 & ouer þe broke he made an wei: druþe & clene inou·  
 þat ouer he wende also: druþe as it alonde were·  
 Al bihynde him euer þat water: smot to gadere þere·  
 & com aȝen al as it was: þo he com to londe·  
 Lord much is þi miȝte: hoso it wole understonde·  
 Hoso hadde meþenceþ such an hyne: to lede him about ilome·  
 He ne dorste noþing carie to wuch: water he come·  
 þe maister of þe tormentors: to wam he was bitake·  
 þo he sei þis uayre miracle: þen deucl he gan uorsake·  
 & is suerd þat he bar an honde: wel uer fram him caste·  
 He uel to St. Albones uet: & criede mercy him uaste·  
 þat he moste uor him deie: oþer bote it oþer were·  
 þat he wiþ him in þe place: þen deþ auenge þere·  
 Up an hul he wende an hei: as hi were assigned to·  
 Wiþ þis holi mon St. Albon: þe dede to do·  
 St. Albon wilnede afterward: up þe hul an hei·  
 He bihuld þat þere ne miȝte: no water come þere nei·  
 Our lord he bad myd gode herte: þat he sende is grace·  
 þat som water moste come: to him in þulke place·  
 þo he hadde ido is orison: & our lord ibede·  
 þere sprong upon þe heie hul: a welle in þulke stede·  
 þe beste water þat miȝte be: þat ȝut ilast ic wene·  
 Euer was & euer worþ: our lordes miȝte isene·  
 þis gode knyȝt þat bileuede on god: uor þat he say er·  
 Wel more he criede þo on him: uor þe miracle þere·  
 & wilnede much þat he moste: wiþ him deie þere·  
 So þat in our lordes name: boþe imartred hi were·  
 Ac þe tormentor þat smot of: St. Albones heued·  
 He ne dorste noȝt zelpe þereof: him were better halbe bileued·  
 Uor þo he smot of is heued: riȝt in þulke stounde·  
 His eien uelle out of is heued: & þerewiþ he uel to grounde·  
 His biȝete was lute þere: it uel adoun al bihinde·  
 He miȝte segge wan he com hom: war her comeþ þe blynde·  
 Louerd muchel is þi miȝte: hoso wolde understonde·  
 þere bi þi wiþerwynne: as men miȝte fonde·  
 St. Albon imartred was: her in englonde·  
 Biside þe toun of wynchestre: as ic understonde·

pere is nou a chirch arered: & a gret abbei also  
 pat men clepeþ St. Albones: as he was to deþe idor  
 Nou bidde we zerne St. Albon: & ihesu crist wel uaste  
 pat we mote to þe joie come: pat euer schal laste."<sup>1</sup>

All the verse lives of saints, whether written in Latin, Old, or Middle English, exhibit the same common traits. They seize upon a few of the salient points in the lives of the heroes and develop these usually with reference to the degree of wonder which the incidents are likely to excite. The purpose of them all is frankly to commemorate the holiness of their subjects, and to incite others to discipleship and emulation. As biographical documents they are, in common with all saints' lives, one-sided: they are religious documents, detailing spiritual struggles for spiritual ends, and if they pause to record anything of the mere physical, earthly existence, they do so merely to emphasise the spiritual, or, at worst, to gratify some whim of the writer. It is true that, as the strictly spiritual purpose of these lives receded into the background, and the narratives became more and more stories to amuse and to aid in whiling away the time, elements of humour and satire far enough from the spiritual were introduced. Professor Saintsbury finds the origin of Romance<sup>2</sup> in "the marriage of the older East and the newer (non-classical) West through the agency of the spread of Christianity and the diffusion of the 'Saint's Life'"; the Rev. Alfred Plummer, as we have already seen, refers to saints' lives as "the novels of all ranks of society." If we may accept these views, we should have no difficulty in acknowledging that

<sup>1</sup> This version is a transcript of MS. Ashmole 43, ff. 164b-165b. In *Early English Verse Lives of Saints* another version, that of MS. Laud 108, in 106 lines, is given. MS. Laud 108 is the oldest of the various versions of the verse lives (c. 1280-90), but Ashmole 43 (c. 1300) more properly represents the dialect in which the original is composed.

<sup>2</sup> *The English Novel*, p. 3.



in the lives of saints (prose and verse) we have the beginnings of the "novel with a purpose."<sup>1</sup>

Apart from these metrical lives of saints, the story of English biography in verse is indeed brief. After a fashion, *The Mirror for Magistrates* continued the work abandoned by the monkish writers and catered to the appetites of those who loved verse narratives somewhat after the fashion of saints' lives. It is significant that John Lydgate forms the connecting link between the two kinds of narratives. *The Mirror for Magistrates* grew out of Lydgate's translation of *The boke of Iohan Bochas descruyng the fall of Princes, Princesses, and other Nobles*, of which, in truth, it was a continuation. "Whan the printer had purposed with himself to printe Lidgates booke of the fall of Princes," thus writes William Baldwin, the original editor (1555-1610) of *The Mirror*, "and had made pryuye therto many both honourable and worshipfull, he was counsailed by dyuers of them to procure to have the storye contynewed from where as Bochas left, vnto this present time, chiefly of such as Fortune had dalyed with here in this ylande: which might be as a mirroure for al men as well nobles as others." The title of the work, however, indicates that the whole, while based upon biography, is not biographical in purpose: *The Mirour for Magistrates, wherein may bee seene, by examples passed in this Realme with how greuous plagues vices are punished in great Princes and Magistrates* :

<sup>1</sup> "They represent the Christian mythology as it has been formed in the course of centuries. Some of them are historical or fixed by tradition; others are the result of fiction, typical of the Christian hero. The style of these legends is, no doubt, coarse and rude to the modern taste; but it is popular, adapted to the subject, to the public, and to the occasion. The narrative is generally happy and well conducted. . . . Everywhere we find dispersed sallies of wit and sarcasm which spare no class, no sex, not the clergy itself. So the Collection deserves attention, not only from an hagiologic, but also from a poetic and literary point of view."—*Early English Verse Lives of Saints*, Introduction, No. 87, E.E.T.S. Original Series.

and how frail and vnstable worldly prosperity is found, where Fortune seemeth most highly to favour. Sackville, in the *Induction*, also states plainly the didactic purpose of the book:

“ My busie mynde presented vnto mee  
Such fall of peeres as in the realme had bee:  
That oft I wisht some would their woes descryue,  
To warne the rest whome fortune left a liue.”

Thus it is that *The Mirror for Magistrates*, called forth by Lydgate's translation of Boccaccio's book, plainly biographical in principle, and continuing the popular verse-narrative literature, is only so far biography as is necessary to “ point a moral ” and “ to warne the rest.”

*The Mirror for Magistrates* is, for still another reason, closely connected with the story of biography in verse. Among its “ examples ” we find Thomas Churchyard's legend, founded on the narrative of Cardinal Wolsey's life, relating “ How Thomas Wolsey did arise unto great authority and gouernment, his manner of life, pompe, and dignity, and how he fell downe into great disgrace, and was arrested of high treason.”<sup>1</sup> Churchyard's contribution is written in a seven-line stanza of decasyllabic verse, rhyming *ababbcc*. In 1599 there appeared *The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey, Cardinall. Divided into three parts: His Aspiring, Triumph and Death. By Thomas Storer, Student of Christ Church in Oxford*. This work, written after the model of Churchyard's legend, may more properly claim a place in the annals of biography.

Of Sir Thomas Storer (1571-1604) but little is known beyond the facts that he became a student of Christ Church in 1587, proceeded to the degree of B.A. in 1591, and that of M.A. in 1594, and is represented by a number of lyrics in *England's Parnassus* (1600). His fame rests chiefly upon

<sup>1</sup> Haslewood's edition, vol. ii. pp. 484-501.

the metrical *Life of Wolsey*. Anthony Wood records that he was "had in great renown for his most excellent vein in poesy," and makes mention of a eulogy bestowed upon him by Alberic Gentilis after that learned doctor had perused the Wolsey poem. We are reminded that Storer "is not to be confounded with such as only wrote thus because it was the mode," and that testimonies such as those recorded by Wood, "pronounced in the age of Spenser, of Raleigh, and Sackville, are not to be regarded as trivial praise."<sup>1</sup>

In the *Life and Death of Wolsey*, Storer gives no new facts. He follows closely the prose *Life of Wolsey* by George Cavendish, and the account given in Holinshed, selecting "from the known details of so eventful a life such passages as form the best theme for poetical ornament or moral reflection." We are not, therefore, surprised to find that later writers<sup>2</sup> commend the historical veracity of Storer's poem. Of the three parts into which the whole is divided, the *Wolseius aspirans* comprises one hundred and one stanzas; the *Wolseius triumphans*, eighty-nine; and the *Wolseius moriens*, fifty-one—the stanza form being that of Churchyard's Wolsey legend. The work exhibits both the good and the bad qualities of the poetry of the age. The classical machinery and allusions, the elaboration, the obscurity "arising from the inveterate love of conceits,"

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to 1826 edition, *Life and Death of Wolsey*, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter (Dec. 31, 1705) to Thomas Hearne, Thomas Smith wrote: "I believe some good historical remarks may be collected from Storer's books, of the *Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, in English verse . . . the poets of that age for the most part not corrupting the truth of fact with the additions of phansy and fable, but thinking that they had done their part well enough if they had put their collections into rithme."—*Letters by Eminent Persons*, vol. i. p. 145. This is the letter erroneously attributed to John Aubrey in the article on Storer in *Dict. Nat. Biog.* In the *Letters*, vol. i. p. 147, the remark is also made that Shakespeare probably took the story of Wolsey's fall from this source.

contrast strongly with the ease and smoothness of versification, the occasional simplicity and dignity, and a vivid imagery that now and then approaches poetry of high quality. The whole takes the form of a story addressed by Wolsey to the two Muses, Clio and Melpomene. To Clio are addressed the "Aspiring" and the "Triumph"; to Melpomene the "tragicke mone" of the "Dying." In effect, the work is a monologue. It is worth while to quote somewhat at length from the poem. Treating as it does of a great subject, related as it is to the work of Cavendish and Holinshed, necessarily to be thought of in connexion with Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII.*, possessing a merit of its own, and standing all but unique in biographical history, it has a claim upon our attention, which, apart from this combination of circumstances, could not be accorded to it.

The narrative introduces us at once into the presence of Wolsey and the two Muses:

" Betweene two Muses, in the deepe of night,  
 There sate a reverend Father, full of woe:  
 They gaz'd on him, and from that dismall sight  
 A kind remorse was willing them to go;  
 But cruell fortune would not have it so:  
 Fortune, that erst his pride had overthrowne,  
 Would have her power by his misfortune knowne.

" Where fruitfull Thames salutes the learned shoare,  
 Was this grave Prelate and the Muses placed;  
 And by those waves he builded had before  
 A royall house, with learned Muses graced,  
 But by his death unperfect and defaced:—  
 ' O blessed walls, and broken towers, (quoth he)  
 That never rose to fall againe with me!

" ' To thee, first sister of the learned nine,  
 Historians' goddess, patronesse of fame  
 Entombing worthies in a living shrine,  
 Celestial Clio! Clio, peerlesse dame,  
 My storie's truth and triumph I will frame;

My storie's simple truth, if ought remaine,  
Enrich my legend with thy sacred veine.

“ ‘ The sad discourse of my untimely fall,  
O tragique Muse, shall pierce thy sullen eares,  
Melpomene! though nothing can apall  
Thy heart, obdurate in contempt of feares;  
My, my laments shall make thee write in teares,  
If, 'mong thy scrolles of antique majestie  
Thou deigne to place a Prelate's tragedie.' ”

In the story of the introduction of the Cardinal to Henry VII., Storer puts into the mouth of Wolsey a characterisation of Bishop Fox of Winchester, which has been much admired:

“ ‘ A man made old to teach the worth of age,  
Patriarke-like, and grave in all designes;  
One that had finish'd a long pilgrimage:  
Sparing in diet, abstinent from wines,  
His sinews small as threeds or slender lines;  
Lord of the citty, where with solemne rites  
The old prince Arthur feasted with his Knights.

“ ‘ He saw my gifts were such as might deserve,  
He knew his life was drawing to an end,  
He thought no meanes so likely to preserve  
His fame, with time and envy to contend,  
As to advance some faithful-serving friend,  
That, living, might in time to come record  
Th' immortall praise of his deceased lord.

“ ‘ He brought me first in presence of the King,  
Who then allotted me his Chaplain's place;  
My eloquence did such contentment bring  
Unto his eares, that never prince did grace  
Poore chaplaine more, nor lowly priest embrace  
Dread soveraigne so: for nature teacheth ever—  
Who loves preferment needes must love the giver.' ”

The story of Wolsey's mission to arrange a treaty of marriage between Henry VII. and Margaret of Savoy, daughter of the Emperor Maximilian, who was at that time in Flanders, is thus told:

“ ‘ Next, who but I was sent Embassadour,  
 With Europe’s greatest monarch to intreat,  
 Caesar of Almaine, German’s emperour;  
 In Belgia keeping his imperiall seat,  
 To handle matters of importance great:  
 My hap was such, the king could hardly ghesse  
 Which pleasde him more, my speede or good successe.

“ ‘ The Argonauticke vessel never past  
 With swifter course along the Colchan maine  
 Then my small barke, with faire and speedy blast,  
 Convay’d me forth, and reconvay’d againe.  
 Thrice had Arcturus driv’n his restlesse waine,  
 And heav’ns bright lampe the day had thrice reviv’d,  
 From last departure till I first arriv’d.

“ ‘ The king, not deeming I had yet beene gone,  
 Was angry for my long surmiz’d delay.  
 I tolde his majestie, that all was done,  
 And more than all; and did his pardon pray,  
 That I beyond commission went astray;  
 And could have wisht for ever to be chid,  
 With answer to content as then I did.’ ”

When Wolsey has won his way into the heart of Henry VII., and is nearing the zenith of his career, Storer makes him speak in this manner:

“ ‘ Transplanted thus into a fertile spring,  
 And watred from above with heav’nly dew,  
 Enlightned with the presence of my king,  
 My branches waxed large and faire of hew;  
 And all about fresh buddes of honour grew,  
 Garlands of lordships, blossomes of degree,  
 White roddees of office, keyes of knightly fee.’ ”

After we have followed the aspiring and the triumph of the great Cardinal, we hear him confessing to Melpomene the frailty of human fortune:

“ ‘ With honorable burdens I have tir’d  
 My fortune’s wheele, that it can turne no more;  
 The leases of my lordships are expir’d,  
 My lamp burnt out, poore metaphor’s great store,  
 To trope my miseries my heart growes sore.

Help me, for I have surfeited of late,  
Some Paracelsian of a sublimate.

“ ‘ Sublim’d indeede, but all the purest gone,  
The treasure is in others coffers laid;  
Now write, Melpomene, my tragicke mone;  
Call Neroe’s learned maister, he will ayd  
Thy failing quill, with what himself once sayd:  
Never did fortune greater instance give,  
In what fraile state prowd magistrates do live.’ ”

In this extremity, the fallen prelate is yet not without hope; with these words the “sad discourse” ends and silence reigns “in the deepe of night”:

“ ‘ Yet I that durst offend, dare hope for grace  
Beyond all reason, contrary to sence;  
Salvation heavy sinners may embrace,  
If God remit the guilt of deep offence;  
Let all the world hang in their own suspense;  
The world is but a poynt, whereon men dwell,  
And I am at a poynt what they can tell.

“ ‘ If any billes of new inditement come,  
At the King’s bench in heav’n I must appeere,  
Long since arrested, now expect my doome;  
Sue where you list, but I must answere there,  
Die and accuse me in that hemisphere;  
Nor flesh, nor bloud my declaration telles,  
Mine owne accuser in my bosome dwelles.

“ ‘ In whose great temple, richly beautified,  
Pav’d al with starres disperst on saphyre flowre,  
The clarke is a pure angel sanctified;  
The Judge, our true Messias, full of powre;  
The Apostles, his assistants every houre:  
The jury, Saints; the verdict, Innocent;  
The sentence—“ Come, ye blessed, to my tent! ”

“ ‘ The speare that pierc’d his side, the writing pen;  
Christ’s bloud the inke, red inke for princes name;  
The vailes great breach, the miracle for men;  
The sight is shew of them that, long dead, came  
From their old graves, restor’d to living frame;  
And that last signet, passing all the rest,  
Our soules discharg’d\_by—*Consummatum est!* ”

- “ ‘ Here endlesse joy is their perpetuall cheare;  
 Their exercise, sweete songs of many parts;  
 Angells the quire, whose symphonie to heare,  
 Is able to provoke conceiving harts  
 To misconceive of al inticing arts;  
 The dittie, prayse; the subject is the Lord,  
 That tunes their gladsome spirit to this accord.
- “ ‘ Stay then, till some good meteor appeare;  
 Or let the sunne exhale me, vapor-wise;  
 Stirre Charles’ wayne, and see the coast be cleare;  
 Let no congealed clowdes or mistes arise  
 Along the mooving circle of the skies:  
 Or rather, shut up all in darksome night,  
 That none may see my silent secret flight.’ ”

It has several times been suggested that Shakespeare may have had the subject of Wolsey’s fall brought to his attention by this poem. However that may be, it is worth while to look at the manner in which both writers have borrowed from what is undoubtedly the common source. This pathetic sentence from Cavendish’s *Life of Wolsey*—“ ‘ Well, well, master Kingston,’ quoth he, ‘ I see the matter against me how it is framed; but if I had served God as diligently as I have done the king, he would not have given me over in my grey hairs ’ ”—was copied *verbatim* by Holinshed, from whom Shakespeare doubtless borrowed it and thus introduced it into *King Henry VIII.* :

“ Had I but served my God with half the zeal  
 I served my king, he would not in mine age  
 Have left me naked to mine enemies.”

Storer’s version of the sentence runs :

“ ‘ And had the dutie to my God bin such,  
 As it was faithful serving to the king,  
 Then had my conscience, free from feare or touch,  
 Mounted aloft on cherubins swift wing,  
 In holy consort borne apart to sing,  
 That now with heavy weight is overspread,  
 And with my body wishes to be dead.’ ”



Unequal in quality as the poem is, and defaced by faults of obscurity and affectation, it yet repays those who take the trouble to read it. Its intimate connexion with the narratives of Cavendish and Holinshed, and through them to the work of Shakespeare, must, apart from any merit of its own, keep it in remembrance. Its disregard and rejection of every detail save those which lend themselves to the progress of verse narrative clearly indicate the disadvantages of poetry as a biographical medium.

Verse lives exerted no influence on the development of later English biography. The verse lives of saints, although they constitute an interesting phase in the development of hagiology, nevertheless, in the evolution of biography in general, represent an extinct branch, and their influence is negligible. Biography—in the etymological sense—does not readily lend itself to treatment in verse; the story of a life is not the story of a few great moments, and the suppression or rejection of all that goes to make up by far the greater part of that life. The history of the form proves this. Verse lives of saints are interesting relics of the past. Storer's metrical *Life of Wolsey* stands alone in biography. Tusser, whose verse "Life" is recognised as the first autobiography in English, waited more than two centuries before Wordsworth kept him company. If the space here allotted to verse lives should seem to any to be out of proportion to their value, we can only plead that their very incompetency and failure seem to call for a treatment more extended than their influence on the general development of the course of biography would merit.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE PERIOD OF NEW BEGINNINGS IN ENGLISH (1500-1700)

DURING the time included within the limits of this chapter, the old habits of life-writing disappeared and the new beginnings were made of biography in the English tongue. The bonds of the old biographical methods loosened almost imperceptibly; the transition to English was gradual. Notwithstanding the fact that many lives of saints in prose and verse were written in English, the supremacy of the Latin language relaxed slowly, maintaining itself, in truth, until far into the eighteenth century. As the interest in hagiology declined, a new interest in antiquarian research arose, and led to the production of many collections which are fundamentally biographical. At first, as was inevitable in such a period, these collections were written in Latin. Later on, similar collections were published in English; but it was practically a century after the publication of the first biographical collection in English before Latin was abandoned by the writers of these compilations. These products of the new antiquarian spirit form one of the most characteristic features of this period.

To John Boston (*fl.* 1410), a Benedictine monk of the monastery of St. Edmunds-Bury, Suffolk, is generally ascribed the honour of beginning this antiquarian research and compilation. Boston, "who gave the first example of that method which succeeding writers pursued," examined the libraries of all the abbeys in England, made an alphabetical list of the books contained therein, and gave brief notices of the authors. Those who continued the method

in Latin, with varying degrees of improvement, were John Leland (*d.* 1552), appointed King's Antiquary in 1533, "the first and indeed the last that bore that honourable office"; John Bale (1495-1563); and John Pits (1560-1616); followed later by Thomas Dempster (1579?-1625), who professed to commemorate the Scotch authors; Sir James Ware (1594-1666), who recorded notices of authors born or preferred in Ireland; William Cave (1637-1713), who, in his ambitious *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Historia Literaria*, begins his list of writers with Jesus Christ "on account of the celebrated epistle which he wrote to Abgarus" ("*quam ob celebrem illam ad Abgarum Edesenum epistolam*"); and Thomas Tanner (1674-1735). Tanner's great work, which embodies the result of forty years' labour, was edited by Dr. David Wilkins, and published in 1748, under the title *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica*. The *Bibliotheca*, based upon the work of Leland, Bale, and Pits, and containing the substance of Boston's unpublished manuscript, fitly represents the culmination of the original group of compilers. It was the last of such works published in Latin.

The works<sup>1</sup> of Leland, Bale, and Pits have not been generally accessible to students, most of the information in regard to them being taken at second-hand. Perhaps for this reason they have been rated higher than they deserve. Examination shows the information which they contain to be scant, fanciful, inaccurate, prejudiced, even ludicrous. In referring to the books, one is amused to find Leland starting out with a dissertation on the Druids; Bale beginning

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as the works of antiquarians and compilers of dictionaries of biography are limited to notices and sketches of writers, it has been deemed best not to discuss them at length in the text, but to list them in the appendix, pp. 287-96, where they are briefly summarised. At most, the early works of this character represent but the growing interest in biographical study.

his catalogue of British writers with Samothēs Gigas, who lived not long after the deluge; and Pits beginning with the mythical Brutus. This fantastic element was pointed out as far back as 1662 by Thomas Fuller. "Being to handle this subject [of writers]," remarks Fuller, "let not the reader expect that I will begin their catalogue from fabulous antiquity, or rather fanciful fabels. For if the first *Century* of *J. Bale* or *J. Pits* their British writers were *garbled*, four parts of *five* would be found to be trash, such as

1. <i>Samothēs Gigas</i>	5. <i>Barbus Druydius</i>	9. <i>Aquila Septonius</i>
2. <i>Magus Samotheus</i>	6. <i>Albion Mareoticus</i>	10. <i>Perdix Prasagus</i>
3. <i>Sarron Magius</i>	7. <i>Brytus Julius</i>	11. <i>Cambra Formosa</i>
4. <i>Druys Sarronius</i>	8. <i>Gerion Augur</i>	12. <i>Plenidius Sagax, etc.</i>

Of these some never were men, others (if men) never were writers, others (if writers) never left works continuing to our age, though some manuscript-mongers may make as if they had perused them. It is well they had so much modesty as not to pretend inspection into the *Book of life*, seeing all other books have come under their *omnividencie*.<sup>1</sup> These early compilers had few scruples about borrowing from predecessors without giving credit to the sources, or about adapting information in any way to suit their purposes. Fuller again, in his humorous manner, calls attention to this fact in a famous parallelism which well embodies the characteristics of the three worthies whom he mentions. It is in the notice of Pits that Fuller speaks out, saying that "he [Pits] wrote many volumes of several subjects, one of the Apostolical men, another of the kings and bishops *in England*, but because he survived not to see them set forth, he was as good as his word, *mecum morientur & sepelientur*, with him they died and were buried; onely that his book is brought to light which is

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Worthies of England*, chap. x. p. 26 (ed. 1662).

intituled, *de Illustribus Angliae Scriptoribus*, a subject formerly handled by many, so that some stick not to say:

J. Leland is the industrious BEE working	}	all." <sup>1</sup>
J. Bale is the angry WASP stinging		
J. Pits is the idle DRONE stealing		

These antiquarians cannot be entirely ignored in a discussion of English biography, however, if for no other reason than that of the pernicious influence which they exerted on those who followed them, copied their inaccuracies, misstatements, false inferences, and fanciful imaginings, and thus perpetuated these errors even to modern times. In his exhaustive *Studies in Chaucer*,<sup>2</sup> Professor Thomas R. Lounsbury treats at length of the influence of these three men on Chaucerian scholarship, an influence which continued until long past the time of Samuel Johnson. What Professor Lounsbury has demonstrated to be true of biographical notices of Chaucer well down into the nineteenth century, could without doubt be proved, to a greater or less degree, of most English biography to the time of James Boswell.

And yet the work of these early antiquarians—even of Boston, Leland, Bale, and Pits—is not entirely without value. The gaps in English biography—not to speak of those in the early history of Great Britain—are numerous enough and wide enough as it is. The destruction wrought by the incursions of the Danes and attendant upon the Norman Conquest blotted out much that we should like to know. In the sixteenth century, the dissolution, from

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Worthies of England*, "Hant-shire," p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> No student should fail to read the first two chapters of vol. i. Professor Lounsbury is severe in his criticism of those who attempted early notices of Chaucer, yet his severity is apparently justified. These two chapters are also valuable to those interested in methods of biography.

1537 to 1539, of the greater monasteries, followed in 1545 by the seizure of all other religious foundations, helped to blot out much of what little remained in the way of historical and literary documents. That we know as much as we do of the early literary history of Great Britain is due in no small part to these unscholarly, uncritical, credulous antiquarians and compilers. It is something to their credit that they recognised and bewailed the carelessness of the times.<sup>1</sup> All this is said with due regard to the worthlessness of much of their work. There is, moreover, it cannot be denied, a certain satisfaction in having only an echo of what may be an historic truth.<sup>2</sup> And how much of scholarly research and disputation might have been done away with had these pioneers been scrupulously exact!

Thomas Fuller (1608–1661) edited the first biographical volume published in the English language (1651), a work bearing the title of *Abel Redeivus : or the dead yet speaking ; The Lives and Deaths of the Moderne Divines*. This book is little more than hack-work “digested into one volume for

<sup>1</sup> Thus John Bale in his *Dedication of Leyland's Laboryouse Journey, etc.*, to Edward VI., 1549: “Among all the nacions in whome I have wandered for the knowledge of thynges (most benygne souerayne) I have found nene so negligent and untoward, as I have found England in the due serch of theyr auntyent historyes, to the syngulare fame and bewtye thereof. Thys haue I (as it were) wyth a wofulnesse of hert sense my tendre youth bewayled. . . . If your most noble father of excellent memory, Kynge Henry the viii had not of a godly zeale, by speycall Commyssyon, directed maystre Johan Leylande, to ouersee a nombre of theyre sayde libraries, we had lost infynyte treasure of knowledge, by the spoyle, which anon after folowed of their due suppression.” Centuries before this, Nennius, in the introduction to the *History of the Britons*, lamented thus: “I, Nennius, disciple of St. Elbotus, have endeavoured to write some extracts which the dulness of the British nation had cast away, because teachers had no knowledge, nor gave any information in their books about the island of Britain.”

<sup>2</sup> As for example: “Then it was, that the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror.”—Nennius, *History of the Britons*.

the benefit and satisfaction of all those that desire to be acquainted with the paths of piety and virtue," as the title page further informs the reader. The manner in which the somewhat more than one hundred sketches were put together is thus described by Fuller in "The Epistle to the Reader": "As for the makers thereof, they are many: some done by Doctor Featly, now at rest with God, viz., The lives of Jewell, Reynolds, Abbot, and diverse others. Some by that reverend and learned Divine Master Gataker, viz., The lives of Peter Martyr, Bale, Whitgift, Ridley, Whitaker, Parker, and others. Doctor Willets life by Doctor Smith, his son-in-law. Erasmus his life by the reverend Bishop of Kilmore. The life of Bishop Andrewes, by the judicious and industrious, my worthy friend Master Isaackson: and my meanness wrote all the lives of Berengarius, Hus, Hierom of Prague, Archbishop Cranmer, Master Fox, Perkins, Junius, etc. Save the most part of the poetry was done by Master Quarles, father and son, sufficiently known for their abilities therein. The rest the stationer got transcribed out of Mr. Holland and other authors." The poetry to which reference is made consists of a summary appended to each sketch. As the first biographical collection in English, the book is worthy of remembrance; it has, in addition, an intrinsic value of its own. It is worth the while of any reader to turn to these sketches. They are not dull; on the contrary, they are full of interest; they are rabidly partisan; they are glowing with honest praise or hot indignation; they are full of unconscious humour. The volume, even though not entirely the work of Fuller, was no unfit forerunner of his later biographical collection, *The History of the Worthies of England*.

*The History of the Worthies* was published in 1662. "The matter of this work, for the most part," wrote John Fuller,

the author's son, in the dedication, "is the description of such native and peculiar commodities as the several counties of your Kingdom [the volume was dedicated to Charles II.] afford, with a revival of the memories of such persons which have in each county been eminent for parts or learning." William Oldys speaks somewhat contemptuously of the biographical portion: "[Fuller's] Lives are in effect no more than short characters, interspersed now and then with remarkable stories which are not always to be depended upon, and there is very little new in him: Bale, Fox, and Stowe are his principal authors, from whom he takes plentifully . . . a fanciful, rather than a faithful writer, very little concerned about dates or circumstances, and, if one might be indulged for once in his manner of speaking, rather desirous of making his readers merry than wise."<sup>1</sup> We may, indeed, agree entirely with the last statement; Fuller had set before himself as one of his objects in writing, "to entertain the reader with delight." "I confess," he writes, "the subject is but dull in itself, to tell the time and place of men's birth, and deaths, their names, with the names and number of their books, and therefore this bare skeleton of *Time, Place, and Person*, must be fleshed with some pleasant passages. To this intent I have purposely interlaced (not as meat, but as condiment) many delightful stories, that so the reader if he do not arise (which I hope and desire) *Religiosior* or *Doctior*, with more piety or learning, at least he may depart *Jucundior*, with more pleasure and lawful delight."<sup>2</sup> Fuller's *Worthies* is one of the most humorous books ever written; one is richly rewarded for dipping into almost any page. The volume was not put together after any scientific method of research; it belongs to the "old school"; but it preserves a vast amount of information expressed in an

<sup>1</sup> In Preface to *Biographia Britannica*.

<sup>2</sup> *Worthies*, p. 2.



original manner. The literature of biography would suffer a great loss were it deprived of the *Worthies*.

Fuller is "very little concerned about dates or circumstances," remarks Oldys, and the remark is just; he took all too little pains in these particulars. "But," writes Oldys elsewhere in the *Biographia Britannica*, in a vein not unworthy of Fuller himself, "though he looked upon dates as so many little sparkling gems in history, that would reflect the clearest and most sudden light a great ways off, he still found or thought them very slippery ware, liable, by the smallest and most imperceptible variations, to lead us greatly astray from truth; and speaks of chronology in one of his books, as of a very surly little animal, that was apt to bite the fingers of those who handle it with greater familiarity than was absolutely necessary; yet he knew there was no giving any satisfactory intelligence without it, especially in the writing of lives. But it was a general or fashionable neglect especially in the more polite and ornate writers, as if they thought that arithmetical figures would look like so many scars in the sleek face of their rhetorical phrase."<sup>1</sup> In 1811, when John Nichols edited an edition of Fuller's *Worthies*, he added this note at the point where he supplied the date of Shakespeare's death: "It is a little remarkable that Dr. Fuller should not have been able to have filled up this blank; which I should have done silently (as I have done in numberless other instances) but that I think it right to notice how little was then known of the personal history of the Sweet Swan of Avon, who died April 23, 1616." The omission of this date by Fuller is a sufficient comment upon both the state of knowledge during the century and the methods of biographical compilers.

Fuller's biographical works were followed by many others written in English on a somewhat similar plan. Of these

<sup>1</sup> Article "Fuller," vol. iii. pp. 2049-69.

we can do little more than make brief mention. In 1675, Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew, published *Theatrum Poetarum*, brief sketches of ancient and modern poets. William Winstanley's *Lives of English Poets* followed in 1687. Anthony Wood's great work, the *Athenae Oxonienses*, "an exact history of all the writers and bishops who have had their education in . . . Oxford . . ." appeared in 1690-92. In 1691 was printed Gerard Langbaine's *English Dramatic Poets*, of which work a continuation and doubtful "improvement" was set forth by Charles Gildon in 1698.

The seventeenth century likewise produced a remarkably large number of "Characters," or brief sketches after the manner of those written by Theophrastus. In the hands of such men as Ben Jonson, Joseph Hall, Sir Thomas Overbury, and John Earle the character-sketch was assiduously cultivated, becoming in fact one of the most distinctive and prolific literary forms of the century. Earle's *Microcosmography* (1628), one of the most popular collections of such sketches, apparently passed through five editions in the first two years of its publication, and five more during the life-time of its author. Dr. Philip Bliss, who in 1811 edited an edition of Earle's work, added a list of fifty-seven characters and books of characters, all of which, with one exception in 1567, were published between 1605-1700. In 1855, Doctor Bliss stated that this list in his own interleaved copy had grown four-fold. Various explanations of the popularity of this form have been given. It has been pointed out for us that "the literature of Protestant England passed, about the time of James I., from the exuberant delicious fancifulness of youth into the sober deliberativeness of manhood. The age of romantic chivalry, of daring discovery, of surpassing danger, was passing away. A time of wonderful thoughtfulness, of strong research, of national quiet had come. Learning had become common to

most educated persons. . . . The thinkers influenced the people. The words *Precisian* and *Puritan*, creations of this epoch, testify to the growing seriousness of the nation. In those earlier years of Puritanism especially, and generally throughout the seventeenth century, there was a strong passion for analysis of human character. Men delighted in introspection. Essays and characters took the place of the romance of the former century.”<sup>1</sup> In the opinion of Professor Hugh Walker, “if ever we are entitled to speak of a literary form as answering to something in the spirit of the age wherein it appears, we are so entitled in the case of the character-writers. For they are precisely the prose analogue of the metaphysical poets. They have the same merits and defects, they show the same interests, and they rise, flourish, and decline just at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

The character-sketches were, without doubt, one manifestation of the spirit which was aiding in the evolution of biography. They were, however, but a passing phase of the spirit, and contributed inappreciably, if at all, to the development of biography. The distinction between the character-sketch and biography has been well emphasised: “In order to establish the claim of the Characters to be considered as a unique production, it is perhaps necessary to point out that they in no way resemble the ordinary biographies of history. These, of course, have reference to definite individuals, and must of necessity exhibit personal peculiarities, which can only belong to the subject of the intended portraiture. The present sketches [those of Theophrastus], on the contrary, are generic, not individual; they represent classes, not particular persons; they are imaginary, not real.”<sup>3</sup> Another writer remarks that

<sup>1</sup> Arber's English Reprints, *Earle's Micro-cosmographie*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> See all of chap. iii. of Professor Walker's admirable volume, *The English Essay and Essayists*.

<sup>3</sup> John G. Sheppard, *Theophrasti Characteres*, pp. 5-6.

“Characters deal with the passing, external, accidental aspects of men,” and points out that of Earle’s sketches, some are “delineations of human nature, common to all time; others are incisive descriptions of ‘characters’ and scenes of the writer’s age, which have now passed away.”<sup>1</sup> We cannot dismiss the character-sketch, however, without calling attention to the manner in which it eventually developed relations to both biography and fiction. “The type of sketch set by Jonson and Overbury,” writes Professor W. L. Cross, “was a good deal modified by the fifty and more character-writers who succeeded them. Not infrequently as a frame to the portrait was added a little piece of biography or adventure. . . . The treatment of the character sketch by Steele and Addison in the *Spectator* (1711-12) was highly original. They drew portraits of representative Englishmen, and brought them together in conversation in a London Club. They conducted Sir Roger de Coverley through Westminster Abbey, to the play-house, to Vauxhall, into the country to Coverley and the assizes; they incidentally took a retrospective view of his life, and finally told the story of his death. When they had done this, they had not only created one of the best defined characters in our prose literature, but they had almost transformed the character-sketch into a novel of London and commercial life.”<sup>2</sup>

The biographical collections, which were so characteristic of the seventeenth century, stimulated the production of many similar “dictionaries” in the eighteenth century. Although the inclusion of these later works exceeds the date limits of this chapter, logically mention of them belongs here; for in purpose, spirit, and method they are at one with their prototypes. Giles Jacob’s *Poetical*

<sup>1</sup> Arber’s English Reprints, *Earle’s Micro-cosmographie*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Development of the English Novel*, pp. 24-5.

*Register* (1719 or 1720); the *Biographia Britannica* (1747-66); the *Lives of the Poets* (1753) bearing the name of Theophilus Cibber, but for the most part the work of Robert Shiels, a Scotchman, one of Johnson's amanuenses in the *Dictionary* work; Horace Walpole's *Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors* (1758); the *Biographical Dictionary* (1761); David Erskine Baker's *Companion to the Playhouse* (1764); and Doctor John Berkenhout's *Biographia Literaria* (1777), make up the contribution of the eighteenth century to this form of biography. Of these works, the *Biographia Britannica* is by far the best; it is the first work, indeed, in the English language, which deserves to rank as a careful and somewhat complete biographical dictionary. It exhibits commendable care in its attempt to exhaust all known sources of information. With William Oldys as its first editor it could scarcely fail to be in advance of its kind. It stands between the old method of careless compiling and the new scientific spirit of the nineteenth century. At least two literary men read and studied it eagerly. Its volumes were the companions of Sir Egerton Brydges during his youth; he tells us that he began to read them as early as his eighth or ninth year. Macaulay wrote that on his voyage to India in 1834 he read, among other volumes, "the seven thick folios of the *Biographia Britannica*."<sup>1</sup>

The work of these industrious compilers is related rather to one branch of biographical writing—that of dictionaries of biography, a branch which has developed and flourished extensively during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—than to the biography proper, the separate, complete, approximately exhaustive account of one person. The way of the biographical collection is not the way to the production of great life-narrative; especially is this true

<sup>1</sup> Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*, vol. i. p. 371.

of the way of the old biographical collections. Some have expressed regret that Thomas Heywood (1575 ?-1650), the dramatist, did not carry out the design to which he refers (p. 245) in the *Hierarchy of the Blessed Angels* (1635) of writing "the lives of all the poets, foreign and modern, from <sup>c</sup><sub>a</sub> the first before Homer to the *novissimi* and last, of what nation or language soever; so far as any history or chronology" would give him warrant. His failure to do so has undoubtedly left us little the poorer, for in all likelihood his work would have been much like those produced later by Fuller, Langbaine, Gildon, and Jacob. Indeed, we can form some notion of what his work might have been from a remark of his in *An Apology for Actors* (1612). "Here," he writes, "I might take opportunity to reckon up all our English writers and compare them with the Greek, French, Italian, and Latin poets, not only in their pastoral, historical, elegiacal, and heroical poems, but in their tragical and comical subjects, but it was my chance to happen on the like learnedly done by an approved good scholar in a book called *Wit's Commonwealth*, to which treatise I wholly refer you." We may admit that Heywood might have preserved something of worth, but the way of Francis Mere's discourse in *Palladis Tamia*<sup>1</sup> is not the way to the production of a promising biographical collection. The labour of most of these antiquarians and compilers from Leland to the writers of the *Biographia Britannica* is marked by a confirmed tendency to borrow and adapt blindly from predecessors; to hand on information without careful investigation; to accept almost any kind of hearsay report. It is interesting to follow the sketch of one author as it is passed from one of these writers to another; such a com-

<sup>1</sup> Mere's "A Comparative Discourse of our English Poets, with the Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets" occurs in *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury; Being the Second Part of Wit's Commonwealth*, pp. 279-87.

parison will do much to give a student a conception of the value of these primitive methods.<sup>1</sup>

Among these antiquarians and compilers one deserves particular mention for his excellent conception of what biography should be. It is true that, on account of temperamental reasons, he failed to carry out his notions, and served chiefly as a collector of information for a hard and ill-natured taskmaster. He had within him, however, the promise of better things. John Aubrey (1626-1697) was one of those happy-go-lucky individuals who give very little attention to their own affairs, yet attempt much to oblige their friends; just the kind of man, in fact, who is his own worst enemy. Until he had squandered his estate, he had been an extensive and eager buyer of books and manuscripts. He seems never to have lost his interest in literary affairs, particularly in literary gossip. Anthony Wood secured his aid in collecting materials for the *Athenae Oxonienses*, and upon the work done for Wood, Aubrey's fame chiefly rests. Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, as they have been termed, are only short and disconnected notes collected in any way—by reading, from gossip at coffee-houses and clubs, at the tables of his literary friends. The substance of them was incorporated in the different editions of the *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691-1721), and Aubrey's manuscripts were neglected until 1813, when careless extracts were published in a collection of *Letters Written by Eminent Persons, and Lives of Eminent Men by John Aubrey* "from the originals in the Bodleian Library and the Ashmolean Museum." Not until 1898 was Aubrey's complete work made accessible to the public in the careful edition of the Rev. Andrew Clark. "Aubrey's lives,"

<sup>1</sup> In the appendix, pp. 302-10, different sketches of Shakespeare are printed for the purpose of such comparison. Professor Lounsbury and Eleanor Prescott Hammond, as has been pointed out, have followed the course of Chaucer's early biographies.

remarks Mr. Clark, "supply an inviting field for comment, correction, and addition. But, even so treated, they will never be a biographical dictionary. Their value lies not in statement of bibliographical or other facts, but in their remarkably vivid personal touches, in what Aubrey had seen himself and what his friends had told him."<sup>1</sup>

Two extracts from letters<sup>2</sup> written by Aubrey to Wood give information as to Aubrey's own conception of the work he had in hand. Under date of June 15, 1680, he writes:

"I do not here repeat anything already published (to the best of my remembrance) and I fancy mysele all along discoursing with you; alledgeing those of my relations and acquaintance (as either you knew or have heard of) *ad faciendam fidem*: so that you make me to renew my acquaintance with my old and deceased friends, and to *rejuvenescere* (as it were) which is the pleasure of old men. 'Tis pittty that such minutes had not been taken 100 yeares since or more: for want whereof many worthy men's names and notions are swallowd-up in oblivion; as much of these also would [have been], had it not been through your investigation: and perhaps this is one of the usefulest pieces that I have scribbeld."

"I remember one sayeing of generall Lambert's, that 'the best of men are but men at the best': of this you will meet with divers examples in this rude and hastie collection. Now these *arcana* are not fitt to lett flie abroad, till about 30 yeares hence; for the author and the persons (like medlars) ought to be first rotten."

On September 8, 1680, he wrote further: "My book of lives . . . they will be in all about six-score, and I beleeve never any in England were delivered so faithfully and with so good authority."

It becomes evident that Aubrey recognised the value of a number of truths in regard to biography which are now accepted. He believed that to be at its best biography should be the work of a contemporary; that it should contain the personal element "faithfully and authoritatively delivered"; that it should not be panegyric, making

<sup>1</sup> *Aubrey's "Brief Lives,"* edited by Andrew Clark, vol. i. pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Mr. Clark in *Ibid.* vol. i. pp. 11-12 and 3, respectively.



man like unto a divinity; and that it should be written in an interesting way, approaching nearer to conversation than to dry and formal discourse. Since he was dissipated and unable to bring himself to the completion of any extensive connected literary work, his notions remained embryonic. It is not difficult to imagine, however, that, given a little more self-control and tenacity of purpose, a little more of ability and judgment, Aubrey might have come nearer to producing a genuine biography than any man living before Boswell. Such imaginings, though, are futile. It is wiser to conclude that the time for Boswell was not yet; that when Boswell did arrive, he was the careful student of those who before him had written biography, as well as the fortunate worker who produced a type of the true method for which all had been striving. It is not to be questioned that Aubrey understood the kind of material that should make up a biography, and that he, more than any one else up to this time, foreshadowed Johnson and Boswell.

During the period that the compilers of Latin biographical collections were flourishing, there were set forth, apparently unconnected with any of the works heretofore mentioned, two narratives which may be considered a beginning *de novo*, the actual dawn of separate, authentic biography composed in the English language. Some time before the close of Mary's reign in 1558, William Roper, the son-in-law of Sir Thomas More, sat down to commit to writing what he could remember and gather from friends in regard to the distinguished and unfortunate English Chancellor. About 1557, George Cavendish, gentleman-usher to Cardinal Wolsey, likewise wrote down what he knew of his unfortunate master. Both men were in a position to write effective and important narratives; both had great subjects for the display of their biographic skill.

Roper states his reason for writing in these words:

“Forasmuch as Sir Thomas More, Knight . . . was in his days accounted a man worthy perpetual famous memory, I William Roper (though most unworthy) his son-in-law by marriage of his eldest daughter, knowing, no one man that of him and of his doings understood so much as myself, for that I was continually resident in his house by the space of sixteen years and more, thought it therefore my part to set forth such matters touching his life as I could at this present call to remembrance, among which things very many notable, not meet to have been forgotten, through negligence and long continuance of time are slipped out of my mind. Yet to the intent that the same should not all utterly perish, I have at the desire of divers worshipful friends of mine, though very far from the grace and worthiness of him, nevertheless, as far forth as my mean wit, memory, and know’edge would serve me, declared as much thereof as in my poor judgment seemed worthy to be remembered.”<sup>1</sup> The *Life* begins abruptly, as if the first part had been lost. The order is the rambling method of loose reminiscence; there is nothing of coherent arrangement in the modern sense: in these aspects, however, the work is similar to most historical composition of the time. The author refers<sup>2</sup> to letters, but does not quote them. He is likewise careful to give his authorities for any information which he obtained through others.<sup>3</sup> The narrative is

<sup>1</sup> Edition, Singer, 1822, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> “Now at his coming to Lambeth, how wisely he behaved himself before the commissioners at the ministration of the oath unto him, may be found in certain letters of his sent to my wife remaining in a great book of his works.”—*Ibid.* p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> “Thus much touching Sir Thomas More’s arraignment, being not there present myself, have I by the credible report of the Right Worshipful Sir Anthony Saintleger, and partly of Richard Haywood, and John Webb, gentlemen, with others of good credit at the hearing thereof present themselves, as far forth as my poor wit and memory would serve me, here truly rehearsed unto you.”—*Ibid.* p. 89. And also: “Which matter was by the same Sir Thomas Eliott to myself,

brief and incomplete, and of course contains inaccuracies; yet the stately simplicity of the style, the pathetic reserve of the writer, and the atmosphere of truth pervading all, make it intensely interesting and mark it as a work of great value.

Cavendish's *Life of Cardinal Wolsey* is longer and more elaborate than the *More*, yet otherwise much similar to the work of Roper. Cavendish begins, as does Roper, with a statement of his reasons for writing: "The occasion therefore that maketh me to rehearse all these things is this; for as much as I intend, God willing, to write here some part of the proceedings of Legate and Cardinal Wolsey, Archbishop of York, and of his ascending and descending from honourous estate; whereof some part shall be of mine own knowledge, and some of other person's information. Forsooth this Cardinal was my lord and master, whom in his life I served and so remained with him, after his fall, continually, during the term of all his trouble, until he died; as well in the south as in the north parts, and noted all his demeanour and usage in all that time; as also in his wealthy triumph and glorious estate. And since his death I have heard diverse sundry surmises and imagined tales, made of his proceedings and doings, which I myself have perfectly known to be most untrue. . . . Therefore I commit the truth to Him who knoweth all things. For, whatsoever any man hath conceived in him when he lived, or since his death, this much I dare be bold to say . . . that in my judgment I never saw this realm in better order, quietness, and obedience, than it was in the time of his authority and rule, ne justice better administered with indifferency."<sup>1</sup> Cavendish succeeded in writing a truly to my wife, to Master Clement and his wife, to Master John Haywood and his wife, and unto divers others his friends accordingly reported."—*Ibid.* p. 95.

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Cardinal Wolsey*, Edition, Singer, 1825, vol. i. pp. 2-3.

masterful narrative; very far, to be sure, from accurate and scientific biography, yet, for all that, a record that holds the attention and leaves the reader with a vivid impression of the great Cardinal. "It is," observes Singer, "a work without pretension, but full of natural eloquence, devoid of the formality of a set rhetorical composition, unspoiled by the affectation of that *classical manner* in which all biography and history of old time was prescribed to be written, and which often divests such records of the attraction to be found in the conversational style of Cavendish. There is an unspeakable charm in the naïveté of his language—his occasional appeals to his reader—and the dramatic form of his narration, in which he gives the very words of the interlocutors, and a lively picture of their actions, making us as it were spectators of the scenes he described. Indeed, our great poet has literally followed him in several passages of his *King Henry VIII.*, merely putting his language into verse."<sup>1</sup>

Cavendish "imparts to his pages," writes Charles Whibley, "a sense of reality which only a partaker of Wolsey's fortunes could impart. But he was not a Boswell, attempting to produce a large effect by a multiplicity of details. His book has a definite plan and purpose. Consciously or unconsciously, Cavendish was an artist. His theme is the theme of many a Greek tragedy, and he handles it with Greek austerity. He sets out to show how Nemesis descends upon the haughty and overbold, how the mighty are suddenly cast down from their seats, how the hair-shirt lurks ever beneath the scarlet robes of the cardinal. This is the confessed end and aim of his work. He is not compiling a 'life and times.' He discards as irrelevant many events which seem important in the eye of history. The famous words which he puts in the mouth

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Wolsey*, vol. i. p. xi.

of Wolsey dying might serve as a text for the whole work: 'If I had served God as diligently as I have done the king, he would not have given me over in my grey hairs.'"<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to observe that Cavendish had an excellent conception of certain duties of a biographer. Not only does he treat of Cardinal Wolsey's life from birth to death, with greatest emphasis upon the political part of his life; he also shows an appreciation of the difference between biographical and historical narration, as well as of the connexion between the two.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, of the moralising element that the reader carries away from the *Life* the most vivid impressions. With however much of "honest indignation" Cavendish sat down "to vindicate Cardinal Wolsey from slander," he did not allow his indignation to blind him to the Cardinal's faults; but as a moralist Cavendish stood forth openly. The element runs through the *Life* from beginning to end,<sup>3</sup> the closing paragraph proceeding in this way:

"Who list to read and consider, with an indifferent eye, this history, may behold the wondrous mutability; the uncertainty of dignities, the flattering of feigned friends, and the tickle trust to worldly princes. Whereof this lord cardinal hath felt both of the sweet and the sour in each degree; as fleeting from honours, losing of riches, deposed from dignities, forsaken of friends, and the inconstantness of princes' favour; of all which things he hath had in this

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. iii. p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> Thus: "I omit and leave the circumstances thereof to historiographers of chronicles of princes, the which is no part of mine intendment."—Singer's *Wolsey*, p. 17. Also: "I have written thus this history [of the siege of Pavia, etc.] at large because it was thought that the Cardinal gave the chief occasion for all this mischief."—*Ibid.* p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> These samples may suffice: "Now may this be a good example and precedent to men in authority . . . how authority may decay."—Edition, Singer, 1825, p. 7. "Here may all men note the chances of fortune" (p. 15). ". . . but to what end she [Fortune] brought him, ye shall hear after" (p. 20). "Until Fortune began to wax something wroth with his prosperous estate" (p. 55). "But ye may see when fortune beginneth to lower" (p. 66).

world the full felicity, as long as fortune smiled upon him: but when she began to frown, how soon was he deprived of all those dreaming joys and vain pleasures. The which in twenty years with great travail, study, and pains, obtained, were in one year and less, with heaviness, care, and sorrow, lost and consumed. O madness! O foolish desire! O fond hope! O greedy desire of vain honours, dignities and riches! O what inconstant trust and assurance is in rolling fortune! Wherefore the prophet said full well *Thesaurizat, et ignorat, cui congregabit ea*. Who is certain to whom he shall leave his treasure and his riches that he hath gathered together in this world, it may chance him to leave it unto such as he hath purposed? but the wise man saith, *That another person, who peradventure he hated in his life, shall spend it out and consume it.*"<sup>1</sup>

Whatever influence these two narratives might have had upon the general development of biography was prevented by the fact that for many years they were circulated only in manuscript. Both were strongly Catholic in spirit, and of course had to await favourable moments for publication. The first edition of *The Mirror of Vertue in Worldly Greatness: or, the Life of Sir Thomas More* has on the title-page the date of Paris, 1626, although Singer suggests that it was probably printed in England.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey* remained in manuscript until 1641, when it was first published in mutilated form for party purposes.<sup>3</sup> Not until 1893, when the Kelmscott edition was printed

<sup>1</sup> Singer's *Wolsey*, vol. i. pp. 335-6.

<sup>2</sup> "It was then not uncommon for books which favoured Catholic doctrines to have a foreign imprint, even when not printed abroad."—Singer's *More* (1822), p. vi. "It has been remarked by Hunter that More's life and works have been all along manipulated for political purposes, and in the interest of the Holy See."—*Encyclopædia Britannica*, Article "Sir Thomas More." A consideration of the different lives of More in chronological order makes an interesting study in biography.

<sup>3</sup> From a letter in the Bodleian Library written by Edmund Malone to Francis Douce (Nov. 24, 1809), I quote the following: "The first edition of the *Life of Wolsey* (4to. 1641) is before me, and is entitled the 'Negotiations of T. W., etc.' The second edition (in 1667) is called 'The Life and Death, etc.' and the third in 1706 is entitled 'Memoirs of the great favourite Cardinal Wolsey, etc.' They are all basely sophisticated and interpolated, originally in

by William Morris from F. S. Ellis' transcript of the autograph copy in the British Museum, did the public have access to the book in the original text. The long delay in the publication of these works retarded the development of biography proper for almost a century, and the limited circulation of the books when first published retarded it still longer.

Not long after Roper and Cavendish had written their narratives, Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605) lamented the scarcity of "lives" in these words:

"For 'Lives,' I do find strange that these times have so little esteemed the virtues of the times, as that the writing of lives be no more frequent. For although there be not many sovereign princes or absolute commanders, and that states are most collected into monarchies, yet are there many worthy personages that deserve better than dispersed report or barren eulogies. For herein the invention of one of the late poets is proper, and doth well enrich the ancient fiction: for he feigneth that at the end of the thread or web of every man's life there was a little medal containing the person's name, and that Time waited upon the shears; and as soon as the thread was cut, caught the medals, and carried them to the river of Lethe; and about the bank there were many birds flying up and down, that would get the medals and carry them in their beak a little while, and then let them fall into the river: only there were a few swans which if they got a name would carry it to a temple where it was consecrated."<sup>1</sup>

Bacon, it will be remembered, in this same work, divides History into three kinds; viz., that which represents a time, or a person, or an action. To the first he gave the name of Chronicles; to the second, Lives; to the third, Narrations or Relations. Notwithstanding the fact that he had not come to a conception of biography as a form of litera-

1641 for the purpose of raising a clamour against the dignitaries of the Church, and thus obliquely wounding Archbishop Laud." For interesting discussion of the history of Cavendish's work, see Singer's *Life of Wolsey* (1825), vol. ii. pp. xiii-lxxii. See also Introduction to Storer's *Metrical Life of Wolsey*, Oxford, 1826.

<sup>1</sup> Edition, William Pickering, 1825, pp. 132-3.

ture dissociated from history, he yet made some valuable observations and pointed the way for the future. In considering the three divisions, he wrote thus: "Of these, although the first be the most complete and absolute kind of history, and hath most estimation and glory, yet the second excelleth it in profit and use, and the third in verity and sincerity: for history of times representeth the magnitude of actions, and the public faces and deportments of persons, and passeth over in silence the smaller passages and motions of men and matters. . . . But Lives, if they be well written, propounding to themselves a person to represent, in whom actions both greater and smaller, public and private, have a commixture, must of necessity contain a more true, native, and lively representation."<sup>1</sup> Bacon was familiar with Plutarch's *Lives*, which a short time before (1579) became accessible to Englishmen through North's translation. The work of Plutarch no doubt set him to thinking and caused him to wish that a similar work might be produced in England. The confounding of history and biography, however, prevented any rapid or marked development of the latter. Writing almost eighty years later John Dryden exhibits much the same conception of biography as does Bacon, and, like Bacon, continues to consider it as only a branch of history. Dr. White Kennet's *History of England*, published in 1706, consists of a series of lives by different authors, and well illustrates the habit of making biographical narrative serve the purposes of history.<sup>2</sup> It was reserved for the eighteenth century to free biography from the trammels of history proper.

<sup>1</sup> Edition, Pickering, 1825, pp. 127-8.

<sup>2</sup> Such representative works from the *History of England* may be taken as examples: *The Lives of King Edward V. and Richard III.* by Sir Thomas More; *The Life of King Henry VII.* by Lord Bacon; *The Life of King Edward VI.* by Sir John Hayward; *The History of Queen Elizabeth* by William Cambden; and *The History and Life of King Charles I.* (anonymous).



We come now to charming old Izaak Walton, the first to take in hand the writing of deliberate biography. As he frequently tells us, circumstances forced him to take up the biographer's pen; and, with sweet humility, he again and again expresses the wish that in doing so he "has prevented no abler person" from undertaking the task. Five biographical sketches—three of his own intimate friends, and two of those not personally known to him—make up the sum of his contribution. His first work was the *Life of Doctor Donne*, prefixed to the first collection of Donne's sermons in 1640. In the introduction to the *Life*, Walton tells us that when he heard that the sermons of his friend were to be printed without the author's life, "indignation or grief—indeed I know not which—transported me so far, that I reviewed my forsaken collections [notes made for Sir Henry Wotton, who had contemplated writing a life of Donne], and resolved the world should see the best plain picture of the author's life, that my artless pencil, guided by the hand of truth, could present to it."<sup>1</sup>

Eleven years later—in 1651—he turned once again to biography, this time writing the *Life* of his friend Sir Henry Wotton. In 1665 appeared the *Life of Richard Hooker*, and in 1670 the *Life of George Herbert*, neither of whom Walton knew personally. Walton was now an old man—he was seventy in 1663—and thus three of the five biographies are the products of his old age. The labour of collecting material and of composing bore heavily upon him at times, and especially during his work upon the *Life* of his old friend Dr. Robert Sanderson, which appeared in 1678, in the author's eighty-fifth year. Nothing could be more delightful than the introduction to the *Life of George Herbert*, in which Walton records how in "a late retreat from the business of this world, and those many little cares with which he had

<sup>1</sup> Major's Edition of the *Lives* (1825), p. 1.

too often encumbered himself, he fell into a contemplation of some of those historic passages that are recorded in sacred story: and more particularly of what had passed between our blessed Saviour, and that wonder of women and sinners, and mourners, Saint Mary Magdalene." This contemplation led him to a consideration of the fact that Mary's free offerings had won for her record and mention "wheresoever his Gospel should be read, so that her name should live to succeeding generations, even till time itself shall be no more." "Upon occasion of which fair example," writes Walton, "I did lately look back, and not without some content—at least to myself—that I have endeavoured to deserve the love, and preserve the memory, of my two deceased friends, Dr. Donne and Sir Henry Wotton, by declaring the several employments and various accidents of their lives. And though Mr. George Herbert—whose life I now intend to write—were to me a stranger as to his person, for I have only seen him: yet since he was, and was worthy to be, their friend, and very many of his have been mine, I judge it may not be unacceptable to those that knew any of them in their lives, or do now know them by mine, or their own writings, to see this conjunction of them after their deaths; without which, many things that concerned them, and some things that concerned the age in which they lived, would be less perfect, and lost to posterity."<sup>1</sup> A dozen years later, Mary's experience was yet running in his mind, for in the preface to the *Life of Dr. Sanderson* he says: "For it may be noted that our Saviour hath had such care, that, for Mary Magdalene's kindness to him, her name should never be forgotten: and doubtless Dr. Sanderson's meek and innocent life, his great and useful learning, might therefore challenge the like endeavours to preserve his memory: and 'tis to me a wonder that it has been already

<sup>1</sup> *Lives* (1825), p. 272.

fifteen years neglected. But in saying this my meaning is not to upbraid others—I am far from that—but excuse myself, or beg pardon for daring to attempt it. . . . And though my age might have procured me a Writ of Ease, and that secured me from all further trouble in this kind; yet I met with such persuasion to begin, and so many willing informers since, and from them and others, such helps and encouragements to proceed, that when I found myself faint, and weary of the burthen with which I had loaden myself, and ready to lay it down; yet time and new strength hath at last brought it to be what it now is.”<sup>1</sup> Walton closed the *Life of Dr. Sanderson*, and his own biographical labours, with these words: “’Tis now too late to wish that my life may be like his: for I am in the eighty-fifth year of my age: but I humbly beseech Almighty God that my death may; and do as earnestly beg of every reader, to say—Amen.”

Walton was a pioneer in biographical work, and as a pioneer he proceeded. “The five short lives which he published, though pale by the side of such work in biography as the end of the eighteenth century introduced, are yet notable as among the earliest which aim at giving us a vivid portrait of the man, instead of a discreet and conventional testimonial.”<sup>2</sup> Nothing at all similar to his *Lives* had been produced in English before his time, save Roper’s *More* and Cavendish’s *Wolsey*, and these he may never have seen; they are not included in the list of books with which he was familiar.<sup>3</sup> His work is his own and shows little dependence on the method of any other writer of biography. He does not say whether he was influenced in his order of proceeding by any author; he was acquainted with Plutarch’s *Lives* which he mentions not only in the

<sup>1</sup> *Lives* (1825), pp. 352-3.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Gosse, in Craik’s *English Prose*, vol. ii. p. 341.

<sup>3</sup> Given in Major’s *Lives*, pp. 443-6.

five biographical sketches, but also in *The Compleat Angler*. A careful reader can discern in his method of making digressions, as well as in his method of making transitions, the influence of Plutarch; yet the influence is but a faint shadow. For example, in the *Life of Donne*, Walton, after telling the story of Donne's vision of his wife and child, proceeds very much in the manner of Plutarch: "This is a relation that will beget some wonder, and it well may . . . yet many will not believe there is any such thing as a sympathy of souls; and I am well pleased that every reader do enjoy his own opinion. But if the unbelieving will not allow the believing reader of this story a liberty to believe that it may be true, then I wish him to consider, many wise men have believed that the ghost of Julius Caesar did appear to Brutus, and that both St. Austin, and Monica his mother, had visions in order to his conversion . . . the incredible reader may find in the sacred story that Samuel did appear to Saul even after his death . . . and Bildad, in the book of Job, says these words: 'A spirit passed before my face; the hair of my head stood up; fear and trembling came upon me, and made all my bones to shake.' Upon which words I will make no comment, but leave them to be considered by the incredulous reader. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Walton was thoroughly steeped in the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers, and in all his works makes numerous references to both.

<sup>1</sup> In Major's *Lives*, pp. 25-6. With this passage it is interesting to compare one from Plutarch: "And so if any credit may be given to these instances, why should we judge it incongruous that a like spirit of the gods should visit Zaleucus, Minos, Zoroaster, Lycurgus, and Numa, the controllers of kingdoms and the legislators for commonwealths? Nay, it may be reasonable to believe, that the gods, with a serious purpose, assist at the councils and serious debates of such men, to inspire and direct them; and visit poets and musicians, if at all, in their more sportive moods; but for difference of opinion here, as Bacchylides said, 'the road is broad.'" —Plutarch's *Lives*, Everyman's Library, vol. i. p. 95.

It could not be otherwise than that the *Lives*, undertaken as they were in such a period and by such a man as Walton, should follow the old-fashioned plan of taking what could be had easily: from his own memory, from accounts given by friends and relatives, from such documents as came readily to hand. There is in them nothing of the careful research method of later times. A limited use of letters and wills is made—Mr. Gosse suggests that to Walton “we owe the idea of illustrating and developing biography by means of correspondence”—these being inserted wherever came most convenient; it is Walton’s custom usually to append poetical tributes and illustrative documents. There is evident throughout the five sketches an appreciation of the personal anecdote which throws light on individual qualities. There is, also, especially in the *Life of Wotton*, a union of history with biography, and a care for the subordination of the historical narrative.

It is noticeable that the five sketches deal with men prominent in Church and State.<sup>1</sup> As yet, no man who devoted himself wholly to literature had been made the subject of such extended biographical narrative. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that Walton writes entirely in a vein of panegyric; by nature, he wishes to condone—to forgive and to forget. “Without doubt,” says Mr. Gosse, “his incorrigible optimism entered into his study of the character of his friends, and it is no part of his inexperience as a portrait-painter that he mixes his colours with so much rose-water. He saw his distinguished acquaintances in that light; he saw them pure, radiant, and stately beyond a mortal guise, and he could not be true to himself unless he gave them the superhuman graces at which we may now

<sup>1</sup> “Alike irresistible in the excellence of their tendencies, the one [*The Compleat Angler*] might be characterised as the Ritual of the Fields; the other [*the Lives*] the Book of the Church.”—Major’s *Lives*, p. iii.

smile a little.”<sup>1</sup> How like him is this passage: “It was said that the accusation was contrived by a dissenting brother, one that endured not church ceremonies, hating him for his book’s sake, which he was not able to answer: and his name hath been told me; but I have not so much confidence in the relation as to make my pen fix a scandal on him to posterity; I shall rather leave it doubtful to the great day of revelation.”<sup>2</sup> The biographies are in no sense complete from the point of view of mere information: they are but delightful miniatures by a charming writer, who more truly exhibits himself than those of whom he is writing. “Indeed,” remarks Professor Raleigh, “Walton’s *Lives* are almost too perfect to serve as models. They are obituary poems; each of them has the unity and the melody of a song or sonnet; they deal with no problems, but sing the praises of obscure beneficence and a mind that seeks its happiness in the shade.”<sup>3</sup> We are not surprised that Wordsworth enshrined them in a sonnet which cannot be omitted in a tribute to Walton:

“There are no colours in the fairest sky  
 So fair as these. The feather, whence the pen  
 Was shaped that traced the lives of these good men,  
 Dropped from an Angel’s wing. With moistened eye  
 We read of faith and purest charity  
 In Statesman, Priest, and humble Citizen:  
 Oh could we copy their mild virtues, then  
 What joy to live, what blessedness to die!  
 Methinks their very names shine still and bright;  
 Apart—like glow-worms on a summer night;  
 Or lonely tapers when from far they fling  
 A guiding ray; or seen—like stars on high,  
 Satellites burning in a lucid ring  
 Around meek Walton’s heavenly memory.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Craik’s *English Prose*, vol. ii. p. 341.

<sup>2</sup> Major’s *Lives* (Hooker), pp. 238–9.

<sup>3</sup> *Six Essays on Johnson*, pp. 103–4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, III. v.

The *Lives* possess a value far and away beyond their contribution to the development of English biography; they are in themselves classics. They are just what we should expect from the author of *The Compleat Angler*. To digress with Walton is a pleasure that no reader should forego.<sup>1</sup>

It was long before English biography changed much from Walton's method. Samuel Johnson followed him closely in plan, cutting away, however, from panegyric, and adding literary criticism. It must be remarked that Walton, too, made observations, though slight, upon the writings of those whose lives he narrated. Walton's were the first biographical narratives to grip the attention of the public. Between 1670 and 1675 four editions of the *Lives* (Donne, Wotton, Hooker, and Herbert), collected in one volume, appeared. After 1678 the *Life of Sanderson* was added to the collection, and the five lives became "the forerunners of a whole class of English literature."

The excellent advance made by Walton was not unattended by contemporaneous retarding influences. One of the chief of these influences was that exerted by the sentiments set forth by Thomas Sprat in *An Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley*, prefixed to an edition of Cowley's Works in 1668. In this *Account*, Sprat succeeded in doing two things; he confirmed and continued the habit of making biography panegyric<sup>2</sup> in character, and he, for a time, delayed the just rising custom of using familiar correspondence to elucidate character. Doctor Johnson was constrained to say in regard to the element of

<sup>1</sup> "Then he [Plutarch] was more happy in his digressions than any we have named. I have always been pleased to see him, and his imitator Montaigne, when they strike a little out of the common road; for we are sure to be the better for their wandering."—Dryden, *Life of Plutarch*. This is another bit of evidence that may be remembered in connexion with Plutarch's influence on Walton.

<sup>2</sup> Sprat believed Cowley's life to be "beneficial for example." "This, Sir," he wrote in the *Account*, "was the principal end of this long discourse."

panegyric that Sprat "has produced a funeral oration rather than a history: he has given the character, not the life of Cowley; for he writes with so little detail that scarcely anything is distinctly known, but all is shown confused and enlarged through the mist of panegyric."<sup>1</sup> Against the using of private letters—a practice foreshadowed by William Roper and first begun by Izaak Walton—Sprat set himself firmly. He admits the excellence of the prose in Cowley's letters: "In these," writes Sprat, "he always expressed the native tenderness, and innocent gayety of his mind. . . . But I know you [he addresses the *Account* to Martin Clifford] agree with me, that nothing of this nature should be published. . . . The truth is, the letters that pass between particular friends, if they are written as they ought to be, can scarce ever be fit to see the light. They should not consist of fulsome compliments, or tedious politics, or elaborate elegancies, or general fancies, but they should have a native clearness and shortness, a domestical plainness, and a peculiar kind of familiarity, which can only affect the humour of those to whom they were intended. The very same passages which make writings of this nature delightful amongst friends, will lose all manner of taste, when they come to be read by those that are indifferent. In such letters the souls of men should appear undressed: and in that negligent habit, they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a chamber, but not to go abroad into the streets." This is enough of quotation to prove that, measured by later standards of biography, Sprat was a hopeless incompetent. Nevertheless, at the time, his influence was great—Doctor Johnson refers to him as "an author whose pregnancy of imagination, and elegance of language have deservedly set him high in the ranks of literature"—and

<sup>1</sup> *Lives of the Poets* (Cowley). By "a character," Johnson meant a panegyric, or "a collection of vague impressions of personality"; by "a life," he meant "a strict biographic record."



not for more than a century was the private letter used as an important and invaluable element in biography.

Up to this point, the term *biography* has been used in referring to such narratives as have thus far been written. It is now time to call attention to the fact that, so far as has been traced, the word *biographia* was first employed in England in the year 1683.<sup>1</sup> In applying the term *biography*, therefore, to narratives written before 1683, we must remember that any such use of the word is out of deference to custom. Prior to the publication of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in 1791—Mason's *Gray* might be excepted—there existed in the English language only biographical sketches—"lives," "characters," "criticisms," as they were variously called. In 1683 there was published the translation of Plutarch's *Lives* which is commonly known as Dryden's. To this translation Dryden contributed the dedication and a "Life" of Plutarch, which "Life," after Bacon's remarks already given, continues the critical literature of English biography. Somewhat in the manner of Bacon, Dryden calls attention to the divisions of History: "History is principally divided into these three species; Commentaries or Annals; History, properly so called; and Biographia, or the Lives of Particular Men." He proceeds then with his critical *dicta*:

"Biographia, or the history of particular men's lives,<sup>2</sup> comes next to be considered; which in dignity is inferior to the other two, as being more confined in action, and treating of wars, and councils, and all other public affairs of nations, only as they relate to him whose life is written, or as his fortunes have a particular dependence

<sup>1</sup> According to Murray's *New English Dictionary*, *biographist* was first used by Fuller in 1662; *biography* by Dryden in 1683; *biographer* by Addison in 1715; and *biographical* by Oldys in 1738. All the other compounds are later. *Βιογραφία* is quoted from Damascius, c. 500. *Βιογράφος* is cited by du Cange as mediaeval Greek.

<sup>2</sup> The influence of this definition may be traced in dictionaries from Johnson to Murray. The *Century Dictionary*, for example, adopts it *verbatim*.

on them, or connexion to them. All things here are circumscribed and driven to a point, so as to terminate in one; consequently, if the action or counsel were managed by colleagues, some part of it must be either lame or wanting, except it be supplied by the excursion of the writer. Herein, likewise, must be less of variety, for the same reason; because the fortunes and actions of one man are related, not those of many. Thus the actions and achievements of Sylla, Lucullus, and Pompey, are all of them but the successive parts of the Mithridatic war; of which we could have no perfect image, if the same hand had not given us the whole, though at several views, in their particular lives.

“ Yet though we allow, for the reasons above alleged, that this kind of writing is in dignity inferior to History and Annals, in pleasure and instruction it equals, or even excels, both of them. It is not only commanded by ancient practice to celebrate the memory of great and worthy men, as the best thanks which posterity can pay them, but also the examples of virtue are of more vigour, when they are thus contracted into individuals. As the sunbeams, united in a burning-glass to a point have greater force than when they are darted from plain superficies, so the virtues and actions of man, drawn together into a single story, strike upon our minds a stronger and more lively impression, than the scattered relations of many men, and many actions; and, by the same means that they give us pleasure, they afford us profit too . . . and as the reader is more concerned at one man’s fortune than those of many, so the writer likewise is more capable of making a perfect work if he confine himself to this narrow compass. The lineaments, features, and colouring of a single picture may be hit exactly: but in a history-piece of many figures, the general design, the ordonnance or disposition of it, the relation of one figure to another, the diversity of the posture, habits, shadowings, and all the other graces conspiring to an uniformity, are of so difficult performance, that neither is the resemblance of particular persons often perfect, nor the beauty of the piece complete; for any considerable error in the parts renders the whole disagreeable and lame. Thus, then the perfection of the work, and the benefit arising from it, are both more absolute in biography than in history. . . .

“ Biography, or the histories of particular lives, though circumscribed in the subject, is yet more extensive in the style than the other two; for it not only comprehends them both, but has somewhat superadded, which neither of them have. The style of it is various according to the occasion. There are proper places in it for the plainness and nakedness of narration, which is ascribed to annals; there is also room reserved for the loftiness and gravity of general

history, when the actions related shall require that manner of expression. But there is withal a descent into minute circumstances, and trivial passages of life, which are natural to this way of writing, and which the dignity of the other two will not admit. There you are conducted only into the rooms of state, here you are led into the private lodgings of the hero; you see him in his undress, and are made familiar with his most private actions and conversations. You may behold a Scipio and a Laelius gathering cockleshells on the shore, Augustus playing at bounding stones with boys, and Agesilaus riding on a hobby-horse among his children. The pageantry of life is taken away: you see the poor reasonable animal as naked as ever nature made him; are made acquainted with his passions and his follies, and find the demi-god a man. Plutarch himself has more than once defended this kind of relating little passages: for, in the *Life of Alexander*, he says thus: 'In writing the lives of illustrious Men, I am not tied to the laws of history; nor does it follow that, because an action is great, it therefore manifests the greatness and virtue of him who did it; but, on the other side, sometimes a word, or a casual jest, betrays a man more to our knowledge of him, than a battle fought wherein ten thousand men were slain, or sacking of cities, or a course of victories.' In another place he quotes Xenophon on the like occasion: 'The sayings of great men in their familiar discourses, and amidst their wine, have somewhat in them which is worthy to be transmitted to posterity.' Our author [Plutarch] therefore needs no excuse, but rather deserves a commendation, when he relates, as pleasant, some sayings of his heroes, which appear (I must confess it) very cold and insipid mirth to us. For it is not his meaning to commend the jest, but to paint the man."<sup>1</sup>

To such a stage had biography and the criticism of biography progressed seventeen years before the close of the seventeenth century. It is at once apparent that, particularly as expressed in Dryden's contribution to the subject, the broad, general principles of biography are clearly set forth. Portions of the foregoing excerpts could well be applied to the work done by Boswell. The conception of biography had become clear in the minds of men like Dryden, even though they had not reached the point where they could consider it as related, indeed, to history, yet

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Dryden*, Constable (1821), vol. 17, pp. 56-62.

definitely separated from it—a literary form *sui generis*. The long process of evolution in the biographical form was, at the close of the seventeenth century, nearing culmination so far as content was concerned: a full century was still demanded to bring about that culmination. What all writers of biographical narrative from long before the time of Plutarch<sup>1</sup> had struggled to present—“that faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life”—was reserved for a native of North Britain to delineate with remarkable completeness and success. It was entirely in keeping with the progress of human thought and manners that the “fulness of time” came near the end of the eighteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Bernadotte Perrin, of Yale University, has shown in the excellent Introduction to his *Plutarch's Themistocles and Aris- tides* (the parts “Plutarch the Biographer” and “Biography before Plutarch”) that “there was a recognised technique of biography long before Plutarch, to the general features of which it can be seen that he conforms, at least in many of his *Lives*.”

## CHAPTER V

THE RISE OF MODERN ENGLISH BIOGRAPHY—THE  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

MANY conditions conspired to make the eighteenth a century of development and fulfilment in the history of English biography. Education was becoming wide-spread; a reading public was demanding literature which was supplied by the various forms of journalistic enterprise—newspapers, magazines, and literary reviews; men were awakening to an interest in themselves. The emphasis was fast shifting from an interest in the higher ranks of society to an interest in the common people: in the stock phrase, men were coming to a realisation, however dim as yet, of “the brotherhood of man.” One of the important factors in the production of this state of affairs was the coffee-house. Writing under date of June 15, 1680, John Aubrey penned the following significant sentence in a letter<sup>1</sup> to Anthony Wood: “’Tis a task [the writing of the *Minutes of Lives*] that I never thought to have undertaken till you imposed it upon me, sayeing that I was fitt for it by reason of my generall acquaintance, having now not only lived above halfe a centurie of yeares in the world, but have also been much tumbled up and downe in it which hath made me much knowne; besides the moderne advantage of coffee-houses in this great Citie [London], before which men knew not how to be acquainted, but with their owne relations, or societies.”

Leaving out of consideration the qualifications for the

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Andrew Clark in *Aubrey's "Brief Lives,"* vol. i. p. 10.

writing of biography, set forth so naïvely by Wood to Aubrey, we now know that Aubrey, in mentioning the coffee-house, recognised at that early date one of the conditions requisite for the development of biography. In 1691, Anthony Wood admitted that such work as the gathering of material for the *Athenae Oxonienses* was "a great deal more fit for one who frequents much society in common rooms, at public fires, in coffee-houses, assignations, clubs, etc., where the characters of men and their works are frequently discussed," than for himself "as 'twere dead to the world, and utterly unknown in person to the generality of scholars in Oxon." Unconsciously, through many years, the men of those times were schooling themselves: those "who gathered day after day in these resorts were not only interested in their companions' ideas and demeanour; they cultivated an eye for trivial actions and utterances, a gift for investigating other people's prejudices and partialities, and they realised the pleasure of winning their way into the intricacies of another man's mind. Hence, they acquired a new attitude towards their fellow-creatures. Characters which would formerly have been ridiculed or despised were now valued as intellectual puzzles, eccentricities attracted sympathetic attention, and it became the note of intelligent men to be tolerant."<sup>1</sup> Dryden and the worthies who gathered at Will's Coffee-House, and the long succession of literary men who succeeded them, helped to cultivate a taste for the gossipy conversation which entered into the very life of later eighteenth-century biography.

Before 1700, except for the biographical compilations which need not here enter into consideration, biography was sporadic and occasional. Indeed, for many years after the beginning of the eighteenth century, "lives" were simply prefixed to editions of the authors' works. The public,

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. ix. p. 31.

however, was now beginning to demand satisfaction of its desire for information about men—common men like themselves. The man who came forward to take advantage of this desire was that publisher of unsavoury reputation, Edmund Curll. As Professor Walter Raleigh excellently says of Curll: “It occurred to him that, in a world governed by the law of mortality, men might be handsomely entertained on one another’s remains. He lost no time in putting his theory into practice. During the years of his activity, he published some forty or fifty separate *Lives*, intimate, anecdotal, scurrilous sometimes, of famous and notorious persons who had the ill-fortune to die during his life-time. He had learned the wisdom of the grave-digger in *Hamlet*, and knew that there are many rotten corpses nowadays, that will scarce hold the laying in. So he seized on them before they were cold, and commemorated them in batches. One of his titles runs: *The Lives of the most Eminent Persons who died in the years 1711, 12, 13, 14, 15, in 4 vols. 8vo.* His books commanded a large sale, and modern biography was established.”<sup>1</sup>

The work thus initiated by Curll soon became sufficiently important to merit the attention of the leading literary men of the time. In No. 35 of the *Freeholder* (April 20, 1716), Addison, writing “Of Modern Historians,” spoke thus: “The misfortune is, that there are more instances of men who deserve this kind of immortality [that secured by a good “life-historian”], than of authors who are able to bestow it. Our country, which has produced writers of the first figure in every other kind of work, has been very barren in good historians. . . . There is a race of men lately sprung up . . . whom one cannot reflect upon without indignation as well as contempt. These are our Grub-Street biographers, who watch for the death of a great man

<sup>1</sup> *Six Essays on Johnson*, p. 117.

like so many undertakers, on purpose to make a penny of him. He is no sooner laid in his grave, but he falls into the hand of an historian; who, to swell a volume, ascribes to him works which he never wrote, and actions which he never performed; celebrates virtues which he was never famous for, and excuses faults which he was never guilty of. They fetch their only authentic records out of *Doctors' Commons*, and when they have got a copy of his last will and testament, they fancy themselves furnished with sufficient materials for his history. This might indeed enable them in some measure to write the history of his death; but what can we expect from an author that undertakes to write the life of a great man, who is furnished with no other matters of fact besides legacies; and instead of being able to tell us what he did, can only tell us what he bequeathed? This manner of exposing the private concerns of families, and sacrificing the secrets of the dead to the curiosity of the living, is one of those licentious practices which might well deserve the animadversions of our government, when it has time to contrive expedients for remedying the many crying abuses of the press. In the meanwhile, what a poor idea must strangers conceive of those persons who have been famous among us in their generation, should they form their notions of them from the writings of these our historiographers! What would our posterity think of their illustrious forefathers should they only see them in such weak and disadvantageous lights! But to our comfort, works of this nature are so short-lived that they cannot possibly diminish the memory of those patriots which they are not able to preserve."

What Addison wrote in regard to the short life of the Grub-Street biographies was true enough. The works of Curll were in themselves of no intrinsic value, yet they were a stimulating contribution to the progressive biographical



movement, as they were also the inevitable outgrowth of accumulated past tendencies. Now that the "taste for biography" was aroused, the supply rapidly increased. No small portion of this supply consisted of what may be classed as criminal biographies, which constitute a remarkable, if peculiar, chapter in the development of English biography. These biographies were far enough from the long-standing tendency to treat only of churchmen, rulers, and great statesmen; and indicate in no uncertain way the shifting, unwholesome as it may have been in this case, of attention to the common people. Criminal pamphlets of actual rogues were first published in English in the sixteenth century; these were followed by longer narratives in the seventeenth; and these in the eighteenth were succeeded by a "deluge of rogue literature" — memoirs, sketches, confessions, and such collected chronicles of crime as *The Newgate Calendar*.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, it is well to note the manner in which the English novel developed as an offshoot of biography. Daniel Defoe was one of those who, on the death of a well-known person, made a practice of writing a life immediately, in order to take advantage of public interest. As he often found it difficult or impossible to obtain full and authentic information in regard to the subjects of these lives, he did just what Addison complained of in the *Freeholder* paper given above, filled his pages with inferences and inventions. In short, "fiction entered into his biographies, just as biography afterward entered into his novels."<sup>2</sup> In the words of his biographer, William Minto, "from writing biographies with real names attached to them, it was but

<sup>1</sup> For excellent treatment of the criminal biographies, with bibliography, see chap. iv. of vol. i., *The Literature of Roguery*, by Frank Wadleigh Chandler.

<sup>2</sup> Bayard Tuckerman, *A History of English Prose Fiction*, pp. 162-3.

a short step to writing biographies with fictitious names;”<sup>1</sup> for, as Professor Chandler well says, when Defoe “turned from composing criminal pamphlets upon Wild and Sheppard [actual rogues] to write *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jacque*, he merely substituted imaginary for actual beings, and enlarged the scale without altering the method of treatment.”<sup>2</sup> It is thus evident that “the realistic writing of Defoe and the realistic novel in England were the offspring of these ancestors, the children of a taste for fact. Realistic fiction in this country was first written by way of direct imitation of truthful record, and not, as in France, by way of burlesque on the high-flown romance.”<sup>3</sup> It is sufficient here to indicate, also, that *Robinson Crusoe* is only a fictitious autobiography, for which Defoe took as a model “the form that best produces the illusion of truth—that of current memoirs with the accompaniment of a diary.”<sup>4</sup> Later, we shall have occasion to see how the novel was influenced in its development through the increasing use of letters in biography.

Biography had now concerned itself in turn with ecclesiastic, ruler, statesman, and criminal; the eighteenth century had well nigh reached its midmost point before it turned attention to the avowed man of letters. Before the death of Alexander Pope in 1744, the life of no man, purely a man of letters, had been written and separately published. Nicholas Rowe’s *Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespeare* but forms the introduction to an edition of the dramatist’s plays (1709). Thomas Sprat had excused himself in 1668 for writing the *Life of Cowley*—prefixed to an edition of Cowley’s *Works*—saying that perhaps he had “spent too many words on a private man, and a

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Defoe*, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> *The Literature of Roguery*, vol. i. pp. 186–7.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Cross, *The Development of the English Novel*, p. 28.

scholar"—although Cowley was not at all entirely a literary man. Pope's death, however, was the occasion of the beginning of that habit of writing literary biographies which has extended, with ever-increasing volume, to the present, when, as Professor Lounsbury remarks, it is impossible for the man of letters to escape the biographer. Within the year of Pope's death two anonymous catch-penny lives appeared, followed in 1745 by the pretentious and worthless two volumes of the *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Alexander Pope* by William Ayre; the *Life* by W. H. Dilworth in 1759; and that by Owen Ruffhead in 1769. It should likewise be borne in mind that Johnson wrote his *Life of Richard Savage* in 1744, and thus began his career as a biographer of literary men with the actual beginning of literary biography. The man of letters had at last come into his own.

It is interesting to note how from the very beginning biographers have seemed to feel compelled to make excuses for undertaking to write of men whose lives have been devoted to literature. A study of prefaces and the opening pages of such biographies from 1744 to the present will furnish abundant evidence of the custom. No more need be done here than give a few examples of the practice. In undertaking to write of Pope, Ayre remarks: "Let no one think it strange or foreign to Mr. Pope that we thus largely discourse comparatively on these poets with him, for he filled up all his time almost in such a way; take from his life his perusal and comparing the poets, his conversation about literature with his friends, receiving letters on learned subjects and criticism from them, and writing again to them all, Mr. Pope's active part of life would not fill one sheet of paper. The two greatest actions of his life are, that he went from London when young to live at Windsor Forest, and in the year 1716 moved to Twicken-

ham, for the remainder of his days.”<sup>1</sup> “So,” continues Ayre, “all readers will be disappointed who look into the *Life of Mr. Pope*, expecting to find anything else but a gentleman, a scholar, and a poet. He filled no office or place, was involved in no lawsuits, was no traveller, moved but little from one place to another, never married, and confined his conversation within the circle of his friends; in short, his life was wholly a state of inaction, and spent in conversation, study, and books.”<sup>2</sup>

Goldsmith, in beginning the *Life of Voltaire* in 1759, writes in a similar vein: “That life which has been wholly employed in the study, is properly seen only in the author’s writings; there is no variety to entertain, nor adventure to interest us in the calm anecdotes of such an existence. Cold criticism is all the reader must expect, instead of instructive history.” He continues in the *Life of Parnell*, in 1770: “The life of a scholar seldom abounds with adventure. His fame is acquired in solitude; and the historian, who only views him at a distance, must be content with a dry detail of actions by which he is scarcely distinguished from the rest of mankind. . . . Such is the very unpractical detail of the life of a poet. Some dates, and some few facts scarcely more interesting than those that make the ornaments of a country tombstone are all that remain of one whose labours now begin to excite universal curiosity. A poet, while living, is seldom an object sufficiently great to attract much attention; his real merits are known to but a few, and these are generally sparing in their praises.” Of men working in a different department of literature this was written in 1772: “It will in brief be only remarked that the personal history of a man devoted to study, or a single employ, does not afford matter of great moment, or admit of those striking events that

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Pope*, vol. ii. p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 154-5.

commonly engage general attention. The scene of action is of a different kind, and by their literary connexions they are best known to the world: In this view our author [Leland], the subject of present consideration, requires particular regard. The life of Leland may, in some degree, indeed, be said to have been active, but it was of a nature confined and laborious, not diversified with a sufficient variety of objects to gratify the spirit of public curiosity, but an arduous task, spent in silent unremitting attention."<sup>1</sup> In 1882, Samuel Longfellow wrote in the same vein: "The reader must be reminded at the outset, and must remember all along, that this is the Life of a man of letters. . . . Now, the life of a man of letters must needs be unexciting and uneventful in the eyes of men of activities and affairs. In such a life, a new book is a great adventure, a new poem or tale a chief event."<sup>2</sup> Thus apologetically has the biography of literary men arisen and held its own against the innate human desire for action and adventure.

It may be well to observe here that some years before the close of the seventeenth century, biography was beginning to grow more formal and studied, the briefer sketches giving place to extended records. This was particularly true in the case of churchmen. Gilbert Burnet's *Life of William Bedell* (1685) was, for the period in which it was composed, well proportioned and excellently written. Richard Parr's *Life of James Usher* (1686) devotes one hundred and three folio pages to the narrative of the Archbishop's life, wherein we find a brief character of Usher as "a private man, a minister and bishop of God's Church, and as a most loyal subject to his lawful sovereign prince."<sup>3</sup> One of the longest biographies published before Boswell's *Life of Dr. Johnson*

<sup>1</sup> *The Lives of those Eminent Antiquaries, John Leland, Thomas Hearne, etc.*, vol. i. p. v.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, Preface.

<sup>3</sup> Pp. 79-92.

was John Hacket's *Scrinia Reserata: a Memorial offered to the Great Deservings of John Williams, D.D.*, completed February 17, 1657;<sup>1</sup> published in 1693. This ponderous and formidable tome of 458 folio pages was frankly intended to be more than a biography of Lord Keeper Williams; the title-page indicates that the reader may expect a narrative of "a series of the most remarkable occurrences and transactions of his life, in relation both to Church and State," and the author takes care to add, near the close of the book: "I need not admonish my readers, for they find it all the way, that my scope is not so much to insist upon the memorable things of one man's life; as to furnish them with reading out of my small store, that are well-willers to learning in theological, political, and moral knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Bishop Hacket at least knew what he was doing, and when he writes, "I have borrowed this much room to set up a little obelisk for King James, out of that which is only intended to the memorials of his Lord Keeper,"<sup>3</sup> he is only following out a pre-determined plan. Of *Scrinia Reserata*, the Rev. George G. Perry wrote: "It displays great learning and much wit, but has the common biographical defect of defending too indiscriminately the many questionable passages in the lord keeper's life: nevertheless, it remains one of the best biographies in the English language. Coleridge in his "Table Talk" credits it with giving the most invaluable insight into the times preceding the civil wars of any book he knew."<sup>4</sup> Of however much value the work may be from the historical point of view, it is bestowing too great praise upon it to say that "it remains one of the best biographies in the English language." This is true only when the actual biographical portion is separated from the great mass of extraneous

<sup>1</sup> See *Scrinia Reserata*, part ii. p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* part i. p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, Article "John Hacket."

material; in brief, it is not a good biography, because its author lacked the power of artistic construction.

History and biography as combined in *Scrinia Reserata* continued to flourish and develop in the eighteenth century; from the numerous types produced, Thomas Carte's *History of the Life of James Duke of Ormonde* (three volumes, 1735-6) and George Lord Lyttleton's *The History of the Life of King Henry the Second, and of the Age in which he lived, in five books, etc.* (1767) may be given as examples. As the interest in biography grew, writers began to look abroad for subjects, and soon Englishmen were publishing such long and diligently wrought volumes as Conyers Middleton's *History of the Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero* (two volumes, 1741); John Jortin's *The Life of Erasmus* (1758); and the Rev. Walter Harte's *History of the Life of Gustavus Adolphus* (two volumes, 1759). Likewise a new spirit of research was entering into the works of both historians and biographers, a spirit that was later in the nineteenth century to work a revolution in all sorts of historical and literary labours. Among biographers, William Oldys was a pioneer in the application of this new spirit, his *Life of Sir Walter Raleigh* (two volumes, 1736) remaining as a monument of painful, laborious, and effective research in a period when there were practically none of the helps now considered so needful for the literary worker. Gibbon at one time formed a purpose to write a *Life of Raleigh*; but, after reading Oldys', and coming to the conclusion that "he could add nothing new to the subject except the uncertain merit of style and sentiment," he gave up the design. Although he does not say as much, Gibbon, without doubt, learned much of the research method from Oldys.<sup>1</sup>

See Gibbon's *Autobiography* for references to the work of Oldys. Consult in addition the *Memoir of William Oldys*, London, 1862, p. xiv. See also, what Oldys himself remarks in *The Life of Raleigh*, vol. i. *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, pp. 4-5, Oxford, 1829.

It will be noticed that Gibbon speaks of the "uncertain merit of style and sentiment," a phrase with which a student of either history or biography finds it difficult to agree. Style and sentiment are no uncertain merits; on the contrary, other things being equal, they are the very life-blood of a composition. Previous to the middle of the eighteenth century, most of the biographies written in English laboured under the disadvantage of a heavy, obscure, involved style: they are not easy to read. As the leaven of Dryden's and Addison's style began to make itself felt, biography becomes a brighter thing to read. Oldys' *Life of Raleigh*, excellent as it is otherwise, is yet laborious reading: the sentence-structure is but little in advance of Fulke Greville Lord Brooke's *Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (published 1652). Literary grace and charm entered into the writing of biography through the slight contributions made by Oliver Goldsmith, of whom in this department of composition Johnson's "*nullum quod tetigit non ornavit*" is noticeably true. Goldsmith wrote four brief biographical sketches: the *Memoirs of M. de Voltaire*, 1759; *The Life of Richard Nash*, 1762, that "inimitable mock heroic, conferring immortality on a marionette of supreme quality";<sup>1</sup> the *Life of Thomas Parnell*, 1759, a hurried composition, written for an edition of Parnell's Poems, published by Davies; and the fragmentary *Life of Lord Bolingbroke* prefixed to an edition of the *Dissertation on Parties*, published by Davies in 1770. Although he touched these sketches lightly—writing them hurriedly and with little preparation—he did much to advance biography to the realm of literature. Since Izaak Walton laid aside the biographer's pen after completing *The Life of Sanderson*, no one approached him in style of biographical narrative save Goldsmith. To pass from Lord Brooke's *Life of Sidney*, or

<sup>1</sup> *Harmsworth Encyclopædia*, Article "Biography."



Hacket's *Scrinia Reserata*, or Oldys' *Life of Raleigh to The Life of Richard Nash*, is like passing from an uncertain and stumbling way through the darkness of a cave to the grassy footpaths of a daisy-sprinkled meadow.

Meanwhile, a literature dealing with the criticism of biography—a literature slender enough to be sure—was beginning to emerge. Men were beginning to discuss biography; authors in their prefaces and opening pages gave their opinions on what had been done and on what they were attempting to do; the periodicals were beginning to carry little essays on the subject of biography into the courts of the coffee-houses; the literary magazines were beginning to publish notices and brief reviews of "Lives." In the issue of the *Idler* for November 24, 1759 (No. 84), Johnson felt justified in making the statement that "Biography is, of the various kinds of narrative writing, that which is most eagerly read and most easily applied to the purposes of life." The form had now permanently and definitely established itself; it had become self-conscious, ready, willing, and eager to shake off any hindering characteristics and to take on those qualities most to be desired. The criticism of the period, so far as it was directed towards biography, set itself principally against the elements of panegyric and against the notion that the lives of ordinary individuals were not worthy of commemoration.

In his suggestive article on "Biography" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Mr. Edmund Gosse states that William Oldys was "the first to speak out boldly" against this "highly artificial thing, lacking all the salient features of honest portraiture," and leaves the reader with the impression that Oldys was the first to attack the solemnly vague, grandiose, panegyric lives of which Sprat's *Cowley*, according to Mr. Gosse, was the forerunner and the example. It is certain, however, that Mr. Oldys was not the first to

speak out against such types of biography; and equally true that Thomas Sprat was not the first to produce such narratives. It is evidence sufficient perhaps to call attention to the fact that Oldys, even though he says that "general characters, high-flown panegyrics, or outrageous satires had very frequently appeared under the appellation of Lives," yet praises "Sprat's inimitable Life of Cowley."<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Gosse has also undoubtedly misinterpreted the closing sentences of Oldys' Preface to the *Biographia Britannica*<sup>2</sup> when he says that Oldys "pointed out the cruelty, we might even say the impiety, of sacrificing the glory of great characters to trivial circumstances and mere conveniency, and attacked the timid and scrupulous superficiality of those who undertook to write lives of eminent men, while omitting everything which gave definition to the portrait." At this particular point in the Preface, Mr. Oldys was simply emphasising the fact that no trouble was to be spared to make the work complete and easy to be consulted even though the preconceived plan should have to be altered.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Britannica*, vol. i. p. xii. See, moreover, what John Berkenhout had to say: "If these authors [of the *Biographia Britannica*] have too generally and indiscriminately exhibited adulatory portraits of our ancestors, it must be ascribed to an excess of philanthropy, and therefore ought not to be peevishly considered." — *Biographia Literaria*, Prefatory matter, 1777.

<sup>2</sup> The Preface is unsigned, but in all probability Oldys wrote it, or at least had a part in its composition.

<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps well that the portion of the Preface here in question should be given: "One thing however we must be permitted to mention before we conclude, and that is, the care to bring all remarkable articles into our Biography at once and under the same alphabet, so that the memorable facts throughout our whole history, the disputable points relating to chronology, the circumstances attending every event of importance, as well as the characters and actions of the persons principally concerned in them, may be all readily found and represented to the reader, supported by proper evidence, and explained by the comparison of what has been advanced concerning them by different writers. To have left out articles of note would have been unpardonable in an historical, and to have treated such

It has already been pointed out that from the days of the narratives of saints' lives, the tendency of biography in Britain had been towards panegyric; it has also been admitted that Sprat's *Life of Cowley* did much to confirm this tendency. It remains to be shown that a reaction against this sort of biography set in long before 1747, the date of Oldys' Preface. Margaret Duchess of Newcastle's *Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle*, appeared in 1667, and even at this early date voices a strong protest against panegyric. "When I first intended to write this history"—we quote a part of the Duchess' Preface—"knowing myself to be no scholar, and as ignorant of the rules of writing histories as I have in my other works acknowledged myself to be of the names and terms of art; I desired my Lord that he would be pleased to let me have some elegant and learned historian to assist me; which request his Grace would not grant me. . . . I humbly answered that without a learned assistant, the history

articles superficially, unworthy a critical dictionary; the fulfilling our Plan, after we were satisfied of its being approved by the public, became our indispensable duty, and to that we have constantly attended in the choice, and in the manner of treating our articles. If, therefore, they appear more numerous than might be expected, or the doing them justice requires a little more room than at first might be conceived requisite, let it be considered how far the reputation of our country, the honour of our ancestors, the respect due to the memories of great men, and the vast importance of setting worthy examples before the eyes of posterity, are concerned. When we reflect seriously upon this, and on the cruelty, we might even say impiety, of sacrificing the glory of great characters to trivial circumstances and mere convenience, it might be justly apprehended that the world would rather resent our timidity, if we should distrust their approbation of the liberty necessary to be taken in this respect, than censure us for doing at once, what, some time or other, must have been done, if we had been too scrupulous in the performance of what we undertook. Architects are seldom censured for small mistakes in their estimates, if the structure they proposed to erect be but uniform and complete: besides, a palace finished at once, is always cheaper, as well as more beautiful, than when helped out by additional buildings made necessary from the cramping of the first design."—Vol. i. p. xv. (1747).

would be defective: but he replied that truth could not be defective. I said again that rhetoric did adorn the truth: and he answered that rhetoric was fitter for falsehoods than truths. Thus I was forced by his Grace's commands to write this history in my own plain style, without elegant flourishings, or exquisite method, relying entirely upon truth, in the expressing whereof I have been very circumspect. . . . I am resolved to write in a natural, plain style, without Latin sentences, moral instructions, politic designs, feigned orations, or envious and malicious exclamations, this short history of the loyal, heroic, and prudent actions of my noble Lord, as also of his sufferings, losses, and ill-fortunes." In 1685, Gilbert Burnet, in his preface to *The Life of William Bedell*, wrote these words: "I will only give a bare and simple relation of his life, and will avoid the bestowing on him or his actions such epithets and praises as they deserve: but will leave that to the reader: for in writing of lives all big words are to be left to those who dress up legends, and *make* lives rather than write them: the things themselves must praise the person, otherwise all the good words that the writer bestows on him will only show his own great kindness to his memory, but will not persuade others: on the contrary it will incline them to suspect his partiality, and make them look on him as an author rather than a writer." In another part of the preface, Burnet insists: "Lives must be written with the strictness of a severe historian and not helped up with rhetoric and invention"; and later on he confesses that in writing of Bishop Usher he found it hard to follow his own principles: "So he was certainly one of the greatest and best men that the age, or perhaps the world, has produced. But no man is entirely perfect; he was not made for the governing part of his function. . . . But this was necessary to be told, since history is to be writ impartially; and I

ought to be forgiven for taxing his memory a little; for I was never so tempted in anything that I ever writ, to disguise the truth, as upon this occasion."<sup>1</sup> This, surely, is speaking out boldly and plainly.

It will be remembered that Mr. Perry wrote that Hacket's *Scrinia Reserata* "has the common biographical defect of defending too indiscriminately the many questionable passages in the lord keeper's [Bishop Williams'] life." The manner, therefore, in which even Bishop Hacket spoke out as early as 1657 (although not printed until 1693) is valuable to note: "I would he had done himself no greater wrong as a justician: but there was a miscarriage which I cannot pass over; a great deal of it was error, but somewhat in it hath the wilfulness of a fault. I am not wanton, like the ladies that lodge about the piazza in Covent Garden, to lay a black patch upon a fair cheek, where it need not. No: my scope is to make his oversight a caution to others. For I intend in all that I write (I appeal to God, Who knows it), rather to profit many than to praise him."<sup>2</sup> In closing, Bishop Hacket speaks still more emphatically: "Yet in these observations I have not set down a Cyrus, a feigned subject, but wrought them into the true image of this prelate. . . . Some are cheated with wit now-a-days after the French fashion, and had rather men should be commended in romances of persons that were never extant, than in such as lived among us, truly deserved glory, and did us good. My subject is real, and not umbratic."<sup>3</sup> If Bishop Hacket could not live up to what he thus set down as a principle, he at least recognised the biographical fault and spoke out plainly against it.

In much the same strain, John Toland, writing at the very close of the seventeenth century (1698), speaks thus

<sup>1</sup> *Life of William Bedell*, pp. 86-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Scrinia Reserata*, part i. p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* part ii. p. 229.

in his *Life of Milton*: "Observing in this performance the rules of a faithful historian, being neither provoked by malice, nor bribed by favour, and as well daring to say all that is true, as scorning to write any falsehood, I shall not conceal what may be thought against my author's honour, nor add the least word for his reputation. . . . In the characters of sects and parties, books or opinions, I shall produce his own words as I find 'em in his works, that those who approve his reasons may owe all the obligation to himself, and that I may escape the blame of such as may dislike what he says. For it is commonly seen that historians are suspected rather to make their hero what they would have him to be, than such as he really was . . . but I am neither writing a satire nor a panegyric upon Milton, but publishing the true history of his actions, works and opinions."<sup>1</sup> In concluding the *Life*, Toland recurs to the same thought: "'Tis probable that you (as well as I or any other) may disapprove of Milton's sentiments in several cases, but, I'm sure you are far from being displeas'd to find 'em particularis'd in the history of his life; for we should have no true account of things if authors related nothing but what they liked themselves. . . . But a historian ought to conceal or disguise nothing, and the reader is to be left judge of the virtues he should imitate, or the vices he ought to detest and avoid, without ever loving his book the less."<sup>2</sup> Roger North, in writing the lives of his three brothers (originally published 1740-42), kept before himself at all times the thought of the danger of running into panegyric. "It may be thought," he writes in beginning, "I have touch'd here too much upon the panegyric,"<sup>3</sup> and in closing he says: "I may be here told

<sup>1</sup> Prefatory letter, *Life of Milton*, addressed by Toland to Thomas Raulins.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Milton*, pp. 141-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Lives of the Norths* (Lord Guilford), vol. i. p. 7, London, 1826.

that if I think, by these descriptions, to exhibit the portrait of a great man, I am out of the way. . . . I answer that I am not giving the portrait of a perfect man; and whoever pretends to do so, is a foul flatterer; and yet the character I give is no small one, because of a single infirmity, natural and unavoidable.”<sup>1</sup> To what extent the writer of the *Lives of the Norths* succeeded, may be inferred from the statement made by the editor of the 1826 edition of the *Lives*: “With regard to the character of Lord Guilford himself, although the biographer has evidently delineated it under the influence of feelings which rendered it impossible for him to be truly impartial, he has yet stated all his facts so candidly and ingeniously that we have little difficulty in forming a just estimate of the Lord Keeper’s real character.” Many more examples of the habit of biographers inveighing against panegyric might be given.

It was not alone the writers of biography who inveighed against the rhetorical, panegyric, untruthful life; one of the pioneers of the English novel found in the consideration of such biographies inspiration which he turned to good use in his fiction writing. Thus it is, that the English novel is again, at this point in its development, indebted to English biography. Henry Fielding entitled chapter i. of *Joseph Andrews* (1742), “Of writing lives in general, and particularly of Pamela: with a word, by the bye, of Colley Cibber and others,” indicating that it was his intention to satirise not only Richardson’s fictitious autobiographical narrative, *Pamela*, but Cibber’s actual autobiography. After speaking of the service which “those biographers who have recorded the actions of great and worthy persons of both sexes” have rendered to mankind, Fielding continues: “But I pass by these and many others, to mention two books, lately published, which represent an admirable

<sup>1</sup> *Lives of the Norths* (John North), vol. iii. p. 352.

pattern of the amiable in either sex. The former of these, which deals in male virtue, was written by the great person himself, who lived the life he hath recorded, and is by many thought to have lived such a life only in order to write it. The other is communicated to us by an historian who borrows his lights, as the common method is, from authentic papers and records. The reader, I believe, already conjectures I mean the lives of Mr. Colley Cibber, and of Mrs. Pamela Andrews. How artfully doth the former, by insinuating that he escaped being promoted to the highest stations in church and state, teach us a contempt of worldly grandeur! how strongly doth he inculcate an absolute submission to our superiors! Lastly, how completely doth he arm us against so easy, so wretched a passion as the fear of shame! how clearly doth he expose the emptiness and vanity of that phantom, reputation!"

Likewise, in *Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (published in *Miscellanies*, 1743), Fielding satirises eulogistic biography, finding his inspiration chiefly, no doubt, in the many criminal biographies; but for all that, pouring forth his scorn on all biographers who "lose themselves in pompous eulogies of their subjects, for their 'greatness,' without consideration of any 'goodness.'"<sup>1</sup> A real Jonathan Wild was hanged at Tyburn in 1725: Fielding's novel is the imagined biography of this criminal from his baptism to his death on "the Tree of Glory." The following extracts will give some conception of Fielding's method and purpose:

"But besides the two obvious advantages of surveying, as it were in a picture, the true beauty of virtue, and deformity of vice, we may moreover learn from Plutarch, Nepos, Suetonius, and other biographers, this useful lesson, not too hastily, nor in the gross to bestow either our praise or censure; since we shall often find such a mixture of good and evil in the same character, that it may

<sup>1</sup> See Edmund Gosse, *History of Eighteenth Century Literature*, pp. 253-4; and Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, vol. ii. p. 303.



require a very accurate judgment and a very elaborate inquiry to determine on which side the balance turns: for though we sometimes meet with an Aristides or a Brutus, a Lysander or a Nero, yet far the greater number are of the mixt kind; neither totally good nor bad: their greatest virtues being obscured and allayed by their vices, and those again softened and coloured over by their virtues."

"We would not therefore be understood to affect giving the reader a perfect or consummate pattern of human excellence; but rather, by faithfully recording some little imperfections which shadowed over the lustre of those great qualities which we shall here record, to teach the lessons we have above mentioned; to induce our reader with us to lament the frailty of human nature, and to convince him that no mortal, after a thorough scrutiny, can be a proper object of our adoration."

"It seems therefore very unlikely that the same person should possess them both [greatness and goodness]; and yet nothing is more usual with writers who find many instances of greatness in their favourite hero, than to make him a complement of goodness into the bargain; and this without considering that by such means they destroy the great perfection called uniformity of character."<sup>1</sup>

"It is the custom of all biographers, at their entrance into their work, to step a little backwards (as far, indeed, generally as they are able) and to trace up their hero, as the ancients did the river Nile, till an incapacity of proceeding higher puts an end to their search. . . . But, whatever original this custom had, it is now too well established to be disputed. I shall therefore conform to it in the strictest manner."<sup>2</sup>

"We are sorry we cannot indulge our readers' curiosity with a full and perfect account of this accident, but as there are such various accounts, one of which only can be true, and possibly, and indeed probably none; instead of following the general method of historians, who in such cases set down the various reports, and leave to your own conjecture which you will choose, we shall pass them all over."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The three foregoing excerpts are taken from chapter i. of *Jonathan Wild*, entitled "Shewing the wholesome uses drawn from recording the achievements of those wonderful productions of nature called Great Men."

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* chap. ii. "Giving an account of as many of our hero's ancestors as can be gathered out of the rubbish of antiquity, which hath been carefully sifted for that purpose."

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* chap. vii.

" Thus we think this passage in our history, at first so greatly surprising, is very naturally accounted for; and our relation rescued from the Prodigious, which, though it often occurs in biography, is not to be encouraged or much commended on any occasion, unless when absolutely necessary to prevent the history's being at an end."<sup>1</sup>

It may thus be seen that there was for many years a strong growth of sentiment against the fulsomely bombastic and panegyric life. So far as its death resulting from the stroke of any one man is concerned, it may be said that Samuel Johnson dealt that stroke when he wrote *The Lives of the English Poets* (1777-81). Apart from the element of philosophical literary criticism which Johnson infused into the writing of biography, his greatest contribution to the development of the form was his abolition of panegyric. Professor Walter Raleigh sums up the matter consummately when he writes that "it is true that Johnson does not offer unmixed praise to any of the fifty-two poets. He was an old man; the heat of his early affections was abated. He had to judge not only of men, but of books, which are sometimes good in parts. His was a new experiment: of praise and blame there had been more than enough; he set himself to show the reason of things by a process of detailed criticism and analysis, so that his book is more than a history; it is a philosophy of letters. Many of the earlier writers of Lives had been servile eulogists. 'We have had too many honey-suckle lives of Milton,' he said to Malone; 'mine shall be in another strain.' It is in another strain; a strain of a higher mood than if he had culled all the flowers of the valley

'To strew the laureat herse where Lycid lies.'"<sup>2</sup>

From this time forth, in theory at least, panegyric in biography was dead. One "P. H." writing to the Editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1777, expressed himself

<sup>1</sup> *Jonathan Wild*, chap. xii. <sup>2</sup> In his *Six Essays on Johnson*, pp. 142-3.

in these words: "I have always thought that the biographer who endeavours to palliate the wickedness or varnish the vices of the man whose life he is writing, does an injury to morality—and to society. The trite adage of *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* is no excuse. If the subject is of importance to be given to the public, the *true* character ought to be given, and indeed the man who paints in colours glaringly false does a real injury to his friend, as he only provokes some one to draw aside the curtain and expose what might have remained unnoticed but for his injudicious forwardness."<sup>1</sup> To this communication the Editor replied: "We entirely agree with our correspondent as to biography in general, and as to the Memoirs of Mr. F. in particular."<sup>2</sup> Thus it was that by 1777, biographers, public, satirists, reviewers, and editors had set themselves against this false note in life writing. As a matter of fact, while in theory the panegyric is dead, in practice, such is the weakness of human nature, it still survives.

The second point upon which the criticism of the century concentrated was that the lives of ordinary individuals were worthy of commemoration.<sup>3</sup> The spirit of democracy was in the air; men were beginning to recognise the divine authority of the individual human soul, and to admit

" That man to man the world o'er  
Shall brithers be for a' that."

<sup>1</sup> Vol. xlvii. p. 625.

<sup>2</sup> The remarks of "P. H." were occasioned by the observations in the issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* for November 1777, pp. 534-7, upon the *Memoirs of Samuel Foote, Esq.*

<sup>3</sup> The following definitions from Bailey's *English Dictionary* (1721) throw interesting light upon the prevalent conception as to those who were considered worthy of biographical commemoration: "Biographer, one who writes the lives of eminent persons"; "Biography," which in the 1721 edition was defined as "a writing of the lives of men," was later defined as "the writing of the lives of eminent persons." Although "eminent" is somewhat indefinite in meaning, it is certain that few, up to this time, were considered eminent unless they had won fame in Church or State.

We have already seen that a remarkable tendency of this interest in individuals exhibited itself in the criminal biographies. Sir Richard Steele in a notice of Captain Alexander Smith's *History of the Lives of the most noted Highwaymen, Foot-pads, House-breakers, Shop-lifts, etc.* (1714), felt constrained to speak in the following manner: "There is a satisfaction to curiosity in knowing the adventures of the meanest of mankind; and all that I can say in general of these great men in their way, recorded by Capt. Smith, is that I have more respect for them than for greater criminals, who are described with praise by more eminent writers."<sup>1</sup>

This interest in the life of the common man steadily grew, and was emphasised by writers of great as well as by those of little importance. William Ayre in his *Memoirs of Pope* (1745) insisted upon the value of the private man's life: "The lives of private men, though they afford not examples which may fill the mind with ideas of greatness and power like those of princes and generals, yet are they such as are more open to common imitation; there are few within whose compass those actions are, that is, there are, comparatively speaking, few princes or generals, but the actions of a private man are as a counsel to all; if good eligible, if bad detestable, and to be avoided: for this reason most wise men have delighted in faithful biography."<sup>2</sup> In much the same strain, Johnson, in the *Rambler*,<sup>3</sup> added the weight of his authority, and made this assertion: "I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful." Acting upon this principle, Johnson had, in 1744, given to the world the *Life of Savage*, one of the first, as it is one of the best, lives of a man having little claim to great

<sup>1</sup> *The Englishman*, No. 48, Jan. 23, 1714.

<sup>2</sup> Preface, p. v.

<sup>3</sup> No. 60, October 13, 1750.

merit. The *Life of Savage* won the praise of Johnson's contemporaries. Sir John Hawkins writes that "The manner in which Johnson has written this life is very judicious: it afforded no great actions to celebrate, no improvements in science to record, nor any variety of events to remark on";<sup>1</sup> and then he quotes Henry Fielding's commendation, in which the novelist says: "The author's observations are short, significant, and just, as his narrative is remarkably smooth and well disposed: his reflections open to us all the recesses of the human heart, and, in a word, a more just or pleasant, a more engaging or a more improving treatise on the excellencies and defects of human nature, is scarce to be found in our own or perhaps in any other language."<sup>2</sup> "The *Life of Savage*," writes Professor Walter Raleigh, "is a tribute of extraordinary delicacy and beauty, paid by Johnson to his friend";<sup>3</sup> and thus a twentieth-century critic agrees with the estimates made in the eighteenth. In point of fact, Johnson not only vindicated his statement that "there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful"—a *dictum*, by the way, thoroughly accepted ever since it was uttered—he produced a narrative that became a model for many similar lives of the humble.

Goldsmith, as a disciple of Johnson, summarised much of the popular opinion in regard to such biography. "History," he writes, "owes its excellence more to the writer's manner than to the materials of which it is composed. . . . Thus no one can be properly said to write history but he who understands the human heart, and its whole train of affections and follies. Those affections and follies are properly the materials he has to work upon.

<sup>1</sup> In his *Life of Johnson*, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from *The Champion* (February 1744) in *Ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> *Six Essays on Johnson*, p. 19.

The relations of great events may surprise indeed: they may be calculated to instruct those very few who govern the million beneath: but the generality of mankind find the most real improvement from relations which are levelled to the general surface of life, which tell—not how men learned to conquer, but how they endeavoured to live—not how they gained the shout of the admiring crowd, but how they acquired the esteem of their friends and acquaintance.”<sup>1</sup> A little further on, he says: “It were to be wished that ministers and kings were left to write their own histories; they are truly useful to few but themselves; but for men who are contented with more humble stations, I fancy such truths only are serviceable as may conduct them safely through life. That knowledge which we can turn to our real benefit should be most eagerly pursued. Measures which we cannot use but little increase the happiness or even the pride of the possessor.”<sup>2</sup> In the *Life of Parnell*, Goldsmith repeats Johnson’s thought: “There is scarcely any man but might be made the subject of a very interesting and amusing history if the writer, besides a thorough acquaintance with the character he draws, were able to make these nice distinctions which separate it from all others.”

With the close of the eighteenth century, the right of the ordinary individual to biographical commemoration was established. All along, the course of the English novel—that offspring of the biographical spirit—in such narratives as *Pamela*, *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *The Vicar of Wakefield*, was helping to vindicate this right of the common people. It is an interesting fact in biography that a celebrated life of a great ruler—celebrated, that is, in the sense of Boswell’s *Johnson* or Lockhart’s *Scott*—has never been produced in English; with but few exceptions it is true

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of M. de Voltaire.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

that a celebrated life of either statesman or churchman has seldom been produced. In English biography, the great achievements have been in the department of letters, and of these the subjects have arisen, for the most part, from the common walks of life. It is not too much to say that English biography represents the triumph of democracy, of individual worth, of human sympathy, of the divine power in the human soul.

The consummation of a long growing and very important custom in biographical narrative was wrought by the Rev. William Mason<sup>1</sup> in his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Gray* (1775). This was the custom of using letters as a part of the biographical method. Letters had been used, as we have seen, in one way and another since Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid*, and particularly since the days of Izaak Walton. Gilbert Burnet had made excellent use of correspondence in his *Life of Bishop Bedell*, as had Bishop Hacket in *Scrinia Reserata*. Richard Parr had appended to the *Life of Usher* "a collection of three hundred letters between the said Lord Primate and most of the eminentest persons for piety and learning in his time, both in England and beyond the seas." Middleton in his *Life of Cicero* had incorporated Cicero's correspondence into the narrative of the life. The custom was in keeping with the steadily growing interest of the public in letters and letter-writing, an interest that began as early as 1664, when Margaret Duchess of Newcastle published a collection of 211 letters descriptive of London life. In 1678 came the translation of the "Portuguese Letters," followed by a translation of the letters of Eloisa and Abelard. Before the first quarter of the eighteenth century had passed a number of short stories in letter form, of which the *Letters of Lindamira* may be taken

<sup>1</sup> See Austin Dobson, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, chap. "Gray's Biographer," Dent's "Wayfarers' Library."

as an example, came into existence. Taking advantage of this interest in letter-writing, Rivington and Osborne, publishers, in 1739 engaged Samuel Richardson to compose a volume of *Familiar Letters* as a guide or "handy letter-writer" for the uneducated. Catching inspiration from his work on this volume, Richardson put it aside for the time and turned to the writing of *Pamela* (published in 1740). All of Richardson's novels are written in the form of consecutive letters. In this manner, the development of the English novel and of English biography ran parallel for a number of years.

Mason, however, did not insert Gray's letters merely as a part of the narrative; he used them to tell the story of Gray's life: in other words, he attempted to make Gray his own biographer. In regard to introducing the letters, Mason says: "I am well aware that I am here going to do a thing which the cautious and courtly Dr. Sprat (were he now alive) would highly censure. He had, it seems, a large collection of his friend Mr. Cowley's letters, 'a way of writing in which he particularly excelled, as in these he always expressed the native tenderness and innocent gaiety of his heart': yet the Doctor was of the opinion that 'nothing of this nature should be published and that the letters that pass between particular friends (if they are written as they ought to be) can scarce ever be fit to see the light.' What! not when they express the native tenderness and innocent gaiety of a heart like Mr. Cowley's? No, by no means, 'for in such letters the souls of men appear undressed, and in that negligent habit they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a chamber, but not to go abroad in the street.' Such readers as believe it incumbent on every well-bred soul never to appear but in full dress will think that Dr. Sprat has reason on his side; but I suspect that the generality will, notwithstanding, wish he had been less scrupulously delicate,



and lament<sup>1</sup> that the letters in question are not now extant.”<sup>2</sup> As to his purpose, Mr. Mason continues: “In a word, Mr. Gray will become his own biographer, both in this and the rest of the sections into which I divide the work. By which means, and by the assistance of a few notes which I shall occasionally add, it may be hoped that nothing will be omitted which may tend to give a regular and clear delineation of his life and character.”<sup>3</sup>

As an innovator, Mason felt constrained to defend—or, at least, to explain—his object thoroughly: “The method in which I have arranged the foregoing pages,” he writes, “has, I trust, one degree of merit—that it makes the reader so well acquainted with the man himself, as to render it totally unnecessary to conclude the whole with his character. If I am mistaken in this point, I have been a compiler to little purpose; and I chose to be this rather than a biographer, that I might do the more justice to the virtues and genius of my friend. I might have written his life in the common form perhaps with more reputation to myself; but surely not with equal information to the reader: for whose sake I have never related a single circumstance of Mr. Gray’s life in my own words, when I could employ *his* for the purpose. Fortunately, I had more materials for this use than commonly fall to the lot of an editor; and I certainly have not been sparing in the use of them: whether I have been too lavish, must be left to the decision of the public.”<sup>4</sup> In the face of these utterances, however, Mason was so much under the influence of his age that he appended a brief

<sup>1</sup> Cf. what Coleridge has to say: “What literary man has not regretted the prudery of Sprat in refusing to let his friend Cowley appear in his slippers and dressing-gown?”—*Biographia Literaria*, Edition of J. Shawcross, vol. i. p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *The Poems of Mr. Gray. To which are prefixed Memoirs of his life and writings by W. Mason, M.A.*, York, 1775, p. 4, note.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 400-1.

character of Gray from the pages of the *London Magazine*, excusing himself for so doing in these words: "I might here lay down my pen, yet if any reader should still want his character, I will give him one which was published very soon after Mr. Gray's decease. It appears to be well written; and as it comes from an anonymous pen,<sup>1</sup> I choose the rather to insert it, as it will, on that account, be less suspected of partiality."<sup>2</sup> Thus carefully did Mr. Mason proceed in his innovation.

Three years after the publication of Mason's *Life of Gray*, Samuel Johnson entered into that agreement with a company of London booksellers to furnish "little Lives and little Prefaces, to a little edition of *The English Poets*," which resulted in a finished body of magnificently mingled biography and criticism of fifty-two English poets. These were originally published in the old and long-established manner—as introductory to the works of each separate poet. Johnson's work marks no great advance in the development of biography save that introduction of philosophical criticism which has ever since marked them as classics in their field. Johnson wrote much in the mood of Izaak Walton—out of a full mind and without exhaustive research. As a matter of fact, he thoroughly disliked grubbing in "the rubbish of antiquity" for biographical materials: such a nineteenth-century work as Aitken's *Life of Richard Steele* he would never have taken the trouble to produce. He little valued the mere mechanical work which any one of ordinary ability could perform; he would have had little in common with Freytag's Magister Knips. "To adjust the minute events of literary history,"

<sup>1</sup> The author was William Temple. The character was written in a letter to Boswell, July 30, 1771, who published it without authority in the *London Magazine*, March 1772, p. 140. Johnson likewise made use of it in his *Life of Gray*.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems and Memoirs*, pp. 401-2.

he asserted, "is tedious and troublesome: it requires indeed no great force of understanding, but often depends upon inquiries which there is no opportunity of making, or is to be fetched from books and pamphlets not always at hand."<sup>1</sup> In this belief, he proceeded in his own way, and confessed in his *Prayers and Meditations*: "Some time in March [1781] I finished the *Lives of the Poets*, which I wrote in my usual way, dilatorily and hastily, unwilling to work, and working with vigour and haste." In consequence, the *Lives of the Poets* owe their value rather to the manner in which they reflect the powerful and original mind of the Literary Dictator who dared to write in his own way, than to any completeness or scrupulous care in literary research. To be sure, Johnson gathered and preserved a large mass of history and floating tradition which might otherwise have perished, and as a result made a permanent contribution to literary history. The course of English biography since 1781 has been, however, entirely away from the method of haphazard composition which he followed. Notwithstanding this fact, the sane attitude of Johnson towards the panegyric element, the critical discourses united with the biographies, the clearness and straightforwardness of the style, the unity resulting from the idea always kept before the mind of the author that he was "writing a life and not a death," all combine to make the *Lives of the Poets* worthy of a secure place in the history of the development of English biography.

The rapid increase of public interest in biographical narratives during forty years is shown by a comparison of the number of lives immediately following the death of Pope and of Johnson. Within two weeks of Johnson's death, on December 13, 1784, there appeared anonymously, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., with occasional Remarks on*

<sup>1</sup> In the *Life of Dryden*.

his writings, an *Authentic Copy of his Will*, and a *Catalogue of his Works*, now known to be the work of William Cooke.<sup>1</sup> This was followed in 1785 by William Shaw's *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the late Dr. Samuel Johnson*; in 1786, by Mrs. Piozzi's *The Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., during the last twenty years of his life* and Dr. Joseph Towers' *An Essay on the Life, Character, and Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson*; in 1787 by Sir John Hawkins' *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*; and in 1791 by James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Thus we have by 1791 a total of six Lives, besides the sketch by Thomas Tyers in the *Gentleman's Magazine*,<sup>2</sup> and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* published by Boswell in 1785. Biography—and in particular the biography of the literary man—had thus after many centuries taken its secure place in the literature of the English-speaking peoples—a place which it has steadily maintained to the present.

We have now come to a consideration of James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, that work toward which all English biography before 1791 tends, and to which all since that date looks back reminiscently. The mere mention of English biography suggests to the average person Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Now we must not consider Boswell as a surprising development or unlooked-for prodigy, although there is no doubt that many do look upon him in some such light. It has already been said that he was the careful student of those who before him had written biography, as well as

<sup>1</sup> The issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* of December 1784, contains, on pp. 992-3, a harsh notice of this book, in which this sentence occurs: "As it is notorious that this Life was announced before the Doctor had been two days dead, and was published on the ninth morning after the world was deprived of its greatest literary ornament, a few trifling inaccuracies will of course be expected, and pardoned by the indulgent reader."

<sup>2</sup> December 1784, pp. 891-911.

the fortunate worker who produced a type of the true method for which all had been striving. As a zealous Johnsonian disciple, he could scarcely have missed being a biographer. We are now, however, face to face with the questions, How did it come about that Boswell fulfilled the true method of biography? and, Just what development in the history of the form does he mark?

Before turning directly to a consideration of these questions, it may be well to say that the "fulness of the times" had arrived; the opportunity for a great biographer was at hand. The taste for the form was strong; the interest in literary gossip was keen; all the elements entering into biographical narrative were fully appreciated. Moreover, a great man—perhaps England's greatest literary dictator—was demanding a biographer. And very diligently did a number of writers endeavour to supply the demand, and very well did some of them approximate success. Mrs. Piozzi, bright and vivacious, but with all the defects of brightness and vivacity, coupled with the Blue-Stocking superficiality and dilettantism, pressed too soon into print. She came very close to supplying what the public demanded; the *Anecdotes*, however, were too fragmentary to be a Life, too hastily and carelessly thrown together to be satisfying. Sir John Hawkins likewise pressed feverishly into the field by a too zealous desire for both profit and fame, which allowed him no time for careful writing and revision, and cursed by a discursiveness which marked him as a second Asser, or Herbert of Bosham, achieved only a brief triumph.<sup>1</sup> Only James Boswell, laughed at by many,

<sup>1</sup> "I have not read more than one half of Sir John Hawkins, whose book I met with at Crewe Hall. It was dull and confused, and impertinent, and illiterate, and with all these faults, it somehow or other interested me."—Samuel Parr in letter to Henry Homer, Nov. 20, 1788, quoted in John Johnstone's *Memoirs of Parr*, p. 4, note.

unappreciated by almost all,<sup>1</sup> through scorn and ridicule, through melancholy and despair, buoyed up by a strong reliance on his own powers, "patient in his simple faith sublime," toiled steadily on for almost seven years.<sup>2</sup> He allowed Mrs. Piozzi and Sir John Hawkins to attempt the satisfaction of the public appetite; his own *magnum opus* must be held back until it was worthy of its great subject. Whatever else we may say of Boswell, we must admit that he had the strength to work and to wait; he had the grace to pay the price demanded for the production of worthwhile work.

And now we are ready to examine the method followed by Boswell in the production of the *Life of Johnson*. This it is not difficult for us to do; for Boswell has been careful to state fully the principles which he kept before himself. It is only necessary, therefore, to gather these together in his own words.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Twiss, in a letter to Sir W. Scott, afterwards Lord Stowell, after pressing him to undertake the task of writing Johnson's biography, and alluding to the report that Doctor Percy "was already engaged in the business," continued: "Nor am I better pleased with the report that Sir John Hawkins or *Mr. Boswell* would perform the task: I do not think either of them equal to the work; the one is a puppy, the other a pedant: suffer not, I beseech you, the life of so excellent a man to be written by such puny fellows: more abilities are required than possessed by all three: rescue his memory from all such mean hands." "This not very sagacious person," writes Percy Fitzgerald, "was happily not to have his own way; but the appeal is valuable, as showing what was the general feeling as to Boswell's fashion of dealing with biography." —*Life of James Boswell*, vol. ii. pp. 104-5.

<sup>2</sup> "Never was a work written under such struggles and depressing conditions. He had, however, the most extraordinary faith in its success, and long hesitated about accepting an offer of £1000 for it." —Fitzgerald, *Life of James Boswell*, vol. ii. pp. 115-6. Cf. also, this extract from Boswell's letter to Wm. Temple: "I am absolutely certain that my mode of biography, which gives not only a *history* of Johnson's *visible* progress through the world, and of his publications, but a view of his mind in his letters and conversations, is the most perfect that can be conceived, and will be more of a *Life* than any work that has yet appeared."

"Instead" (writes Boswell) "of melting down my materials into one mass, and constantly speaking in my own person . . . I have resolved to adopt and enlarge upon the excellent plan of Mr. Mason, in his *Memoirs of Gray*. Wherever narrative is necessary to explain, connect, and supply, I furnish it to the best of my abilities; but in the chronological series of Johnson's life, which I trace as distinctly as I can, year by year, I produce, wherever it is in my power, his own minutes, letters, or conversation, being convinced that this method is more lively, and will make my readers better acquainted with him, than even most of those were who actually knew him, but could know him only partially; whereas there is here an accumulation of intelligence from various points, by which his character is more fully understood and appreciated.

"Indeed I cannot conceive a more perfect method of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought. . . . I will venture to say that he will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever yet lived.

"And he will be seen as he really was, for I profess to write, not his panegyric, which must be all praise, but his *Life*; which, great and good as he was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect. To be as he was, is indeed subject of panegyric enough to any man in this state of being: but in every picture there should be shade as well as light, and when I delineate him without reserve, I do what he himself recommended, both by his precept and his example."

[Here Boswell quotes the last paragraph of *Rambler*, No. 60, in which occurs Johnson's statement, "If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to Knowledge, to virtue and to truth."]

"What I consider as the peculiar value of the following work, is, the quantity it contains of Johnson's conversation . . . of which the specimens that I have given upon a former occasion [in a *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 1785], have been received with so much approbation, that I have good ground for supposing that the world will not be indifferent to more ample communications of a similar nature."

"If authority be required, let us appeal to Plutarch, the prince of ancient biographers. . . . 'Nor is it always in the most distinguished achievements that men's virtues or vices may be best discerned; but very often an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest, shall distinguish a person's real character more than the greatest sieges or the most important battles.'

“ To this may be added the sentiments of the very man whose life I am about to exhibit.

“ ‘The business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue. The account of Thuanus is with great propriety said by its author to have been written, that it might lay open to posterity the private and familiar character of that man, *cujus ingenium et candorem ex ipsius scriptis sunt olim semper miraturi*, whose candour and genius will to the end of time be by his writings preserved in admiration.

“ ‘There are many invisible circumstances, which whether we read as enquiries after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science, or increase our virtue, are more important than public occurrences. Thus Sallust, the great master of nature, has not forgot in his account of Catiline to remark, that his walk was now quick, and again slow, as an indication of a mind revolving with violent commotion. Thus the story of Melancthon affords a striking lecture on the value of time, by informing us, that when he had made an appointment, he expected not only the hour, but the minute to be fixed, that the day might not run out in the idleness of suspense; and all the plans and enterprises of De Witt are now of less importance to the world than that part of his personal character, which represents him as careful of his health, and negligent of his life.

“ ‘But biography has often been allotted to writers, who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from public papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferences; and have so little regard to the manners or behaviour of their heroes, that more knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral.

“ ‘There are indeed, some natural reasons why these narratives are often written by such as were not likely to give much instruction or delight, and why most accounts of particular persons are barren and useless. If a life be delayed till interest and envy are at end, we may hope for impartiality, but must expect little intelligence; for the incidents which give excellence to biography are of a volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory, and are



transmitted by tradition. We know how few can pourtray a living acquaintance, except by his most prominent and observable particularities, and the grosser features of his mind; and it may be easily imagined how much of this knowledge may be lost in imparting it, and how soon a succession of copies will lose all resemblance to the original.' <sup>1</sup>

"I am fully aware of the objections which may be made to the minuteness on some occasions of my detail of Johnson's conversation, and how happily it is adapted for the petty exercise of ridicule by men of superficial understanding and ludicrous fancy: but I remain firm and confident in my opinion, that minute particulars are frequently characteristick, and always amusing, when they relate to a distinguished man. I am therefore exceedingly unwilling that anything, however slight, which my illustrious friend thought it worth his while to express, with any degree of point, should perish. For this almost superstitious reverence, I have found very old and venerable authority, quoted by our great modern prelate, Secker, in whose tenth sermon there is the following passage:

" ' Rabbi David Kimchi, a noted Jewish Commentator, who lived about five hundred years ago, explains that passage in the first Psalm, *His leaf also shall not wither*, from Rabbins yet older than himself, thus: That *even the idle talk*, so he expresses it, *of a good man ought to be regarded*; the most superfluous things he saith are always of some value. And other ancient authorities have the same phrase, nearly in the same sense.' " <sup>2</sup>

From these quotations it can be seen that Boswell was a careful student of biography, and that he built upon foundations laid in the past. Every method employed in the *Life of Johnson* had, to a certain extent, been practised by previous writers of biography. Thus, the use of letters had grown, along with the interest in letter-writing, from Roper through Walton, Burnet, Parr, Hacket, and Mason; the practice of recording familiar anecdotes had steadily advanced from Aubrey to Spence and Johnson, had been essayed by Boswell himself in *A Journal of the Tour to the Hebrides*, and firmly established by the public reception accorded to Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes of Johnson*; the

<sup>1</sup> *Rambler*, No. 60. The reader will observe that, for the most part, Johnson has merely amplified Plutarch's statement.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Johnson*, Hill's edition, vol. i. pp. 29-33.

growing distaste for panegyric had culminated in Johnson's attitude towards it, and, of course, Boswell, as Johnson's disciple, could not be a panegyrist. Finally, the recording of conversation, of which there has always been in English biography a little, was perfected by Boswell. It can readily be seen, in conclusion, that Boswell has simply taken Plutarch's nut-shell statement, and followed it faithfully. Through so many centuries had practice followed theory before catching up with her.

Before the publication of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, public opinion had been much divided upon several points in regard to biography. Addison had written in 1716: "The truth of it is, as the lives of great men cannot be written with any tolerable degree of elegance or exactness within a short space after their decease; so neither is it fit that the history of a person who has acted among us in a public character, should appear, until envy and friendship are laid asleep, and the prejudice both of his antagonists and adherents be, in some degree, softened and subdued. . . . It were happy for us, could we prevail upon ourselves to imagine that one who differs from us in opinion can possibly be an honest man; and that we might do the same justice to one another which will be done us hereafter by those who shall make their appearance in the world when this generation is no more. But in our present miserable and divided condition, how just soever a man's pretensions may be to a great or blameless reputation, he must expect his share of obloquy and reproach; and even with regard to his posthumous character, content himself with such a kind of consideration as induced the famous Sir Francis Bacon, after having bequeathed his soul to God and his body to the earth, to leave his fame to foreign nations; and, after some years, to his own country." <sup>1</sup> In opposition

<sup>1</sup> *Freeholder*, No. 35.

to this opinion, that of Johnson has already been given, the tenor of which is that if lives are delayed the salient features will be forgotten and lost.

In 1787, George Horne, D.D., formerly president of Magdalen College, Oxford, and afterwards Bishop of Norwich, defended the biographers who "seem conscientiously to have followed the rule laid down by him [Johnson]—Sir, if one man undertake to write the life of another, he undertakes to exhibit his true and real character: but this can be done only by a faithful and accurate delineation of the particulars which discriminate that character." In closing his defence, Bishop Horne says: "On the whole—In the memoirs of him that have been published, there are so many witty sayings, and so many wise ones, by which the world, if it so please, may be at once entertained and improved, that I do not regret their publication. In this, as in all other instances, we are to adopt the good and reject the evil. The little stories of his oddities and his infirmities in common life will, after a while, be overlooked and forgotten; but his writings will live forever, still more and more studied and admired, while Britons shall continue to be characterised by a love of elegance and sublimity, of good sense and virtue. The sincerity of his repentance, the steadfastness of his faith, and the fervour of his charity, forbid us to doubt, that his sun set in clouds, to rise without them: and of this let us always be mindful, that every one who is made better by his books will add a wreath to his crown." <sup>1</sup> Something over a month later, George Canning, writing of his fictitious Gregory Griffin, launched these shafts of satire at the Johnsonian biographers: "It must be confessed that I have for some time intended (and have collected materials for the purpose) as the eyes of the world must infallibly be fixed on his exit, to favour it after

<sup>1</sup> *Olla Podrida*, No. 13, June 9, 1787.

Mr. G.'s demise, with a collection of *Anecdotes, Stories, Smart Sayings, Witty Repartees, Funny Jokes, and Shining Sentiments*, under the comprehensive title of *Griffiniana*. . . . I have however been once on the point of dropping the design, when it was represented to me by a friend, on whose judgment I had great reliance, 'that I should act unworthily as a biographer, and ungenerously as a friend, in endeavouring to reduce the name of Mr. Griffin by such a publication to the level of Joe Miller and Tom Brown; and in rashly bringing to light, such uninteresting and trifling effusions of momentary mirth, or occasional levity, as would detract from the weight of his other performances; and such, as from their own intrinsic worth, could only pass without ridicule, when they passed without public observation.'"<sup>1</sup> In a more broadly satirical vein, Peter Pindar (Dr. John Wolcot) had produced his celebrated *Bozzi and Piozzi, or the British Biographers*, in 1786.

In No. II of *Lucubrations, or Winter Evenings*,<sup>2</sup> Vice-simus Knox wrote "On the Character of Doctor Johnson and the Abuse of Biography." In the course of his remarks he says: "Few men could stand so fiery a trial as he [Johnson] has done. . . . Biography is every day descending from its dignity. Instead of an instructive recital, it is becoming an instrument to the mere gratification of an impertinent, not to say malignant, curiosity. There are certain foibles and weaknesses which should be shut up in the coffin with the poor relics of fallen humanity. Wherever the greater part of a character is *shining*, the *few blemishes* should be covered with the pall. I am apprehensive that the custom of exposing the nakedness of eminent men of every type, will have an unfavourable influence on virtue. It may teach men to fear celebrity; and by extin-

<sup>1</sup> *Microcosm*, No. 39, July 30, 1787.

<sup>2</sup> First edition published 1788.

guishing the desire of fame and posthumous glory, destroy one powerful motive to excellence. . . . I think there is reason to fear lest the moral writings of Johnson should lose something of their effect by this unfortunate degradation. . . . It was usual to write the lives of great men *con amore*, with affection for them, and there ran a vein of panegyric with the narrative. Writer and reader agreed in loving the character, and the reader's love was increased and confirmed by the writer's representation. An ardour of imitation was thus excited, and the hero of the story placed, without one dissenting voice, in some honourable niche in the temple of Fame. But this biographical anatomy, in minutely dissecting parts, destroys the beauty of the whole. . . . I wish that his life had been written in the manner of the French *eloges*, and with the affection and reverence due to supereminent merit. . . . If he were alive, he would crush the swarms of insects that have attacked his character, and with one sarcastic blow, flap them into non-existence."

In the face of such diverse opinions did Boswell proceed with his labours. It is a sure testimony to his biographical skill and artistic sense that, in the very face of this conflict of opinion, he held to his own notion and produced a biography which remains a standard of excellence, and of which all succeeding biographies have been only variations. It must have been with feelings of the deepest satisfaction that Boswell read in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for May 1791, this sentence in review of the completed *Life of Johnson*: "A literary portrait is here presented which all who knew the original will allow to be the MAN HIMSELF."<sup>1</sup> The observations written by Robert Anderson, M.D., in his all-but-forgotten compilation from the narratives of Hawkins, Boswell, and Murphy, are well worthy of a place here as a summary of contemporary opinion. Much has

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 61, p. 466.

been written of Boswell since 1791: very little of what has been written excels Anderson's just remarks: "The narrative of Mr. Boswell is written with more comprehension of mind, accuracy of intelligence, clearness of narration, and elegance of language [than are any of the others]; and is more strongly marked by the *desiderium chari capitis*, which is the first feature of affectionate remembrance . . . and was received by the world with most extraordinary avidity. . . . Xenophon's *Memorabilia* of Socrates may possibly have suggested to Mr. Boswell the idea of presenting and giving to the world the *Memorabilia* of his venerable friend;<sup>1</sup> but he professes to have followed the model of Mason in his *Memoirs of Gray*. He has, however, the advantage of Mason, in the quantity, variety, and richness of his materials. . . . The incidental conversations between so eminent an instructor of mankind, and his friends, the numerous body of anecdotes, literary and biographical, and the letters which are occasionally interspersed, and naturally introduced, in the narrative part of Mr. Boswell's ample performance, open and disclose to the eager curiosity of rational and laudable inquiry, an immense storehouse of mental treasure, which far exceeds, in merit and value, the voluminous collections of the learned and ingenious men of other nations. With some venial exceptions on the score of egotism and indiscriminate admiration, his work exhibits the most copious, interesting, and finished picture of the life and opinions of an eminent man, that was ever executed; and is justly esteemed one of the most instructive and entertaining books in the English language. The eccentricities of Mr. Boswell it is useless to detail. They have already been the subject of ridicule in various different forms and publications, by men of superficial understanding

<sup>1</sup> See *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, p. 407, Dent's "Temple Classics."

and ludicrous fancy. Many have supposed him to be a mere relater of the sayings of others; but he possessed considerable intellectual powers, for which he has not had sufficient credit. It is manifest to every reader of any discernment, that he could never have collected such a mass of information, and just observations on human life, as his very valuable work contains, without great strength of mind, and much various knowledge, as he never could have displayed his collections in so lively a manner, had he not possessed a very picturesque imagination; or in other words, had he not had a very happy turn for poetry, as well as for humour and for wit.”<sup>1</sup>

An “explanation” of Boswell may be left for others; it will perhaps be enough to repeat here that apart from any other considerations, he paid the price necessary for the production of such a work, in labour of the severest and most sustained kind. “I have sometimes been obliged,” he writes, “to run half over London, in order to fix a date correctly; which, when I had accomplished, I well knew would attain me no praise, though a failure would have been to my discredit.”<sup>2</sup> Such carefulness in mere matters of detail is, of course, of minor importance; Boswell was willing, in addition, to subject himself to ridicule in the attempt to bring his work up to his ideal of what it should be. “A trick which I have seen played on common occasions, of sitting stealthily down at the other end of the room to write at the moment what should be said in company, either *by* Dr. Johnson or *to* him, I never practised myself, nor approved of in another,” writes Mrs. Piozzi.<sup>3</sup> True enough; it need only be said in reply, however, that Mrs.

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., with Critical Observations on his Works*, London, 1795, pp. 4-8.

<sup>2</sup> Advertisement to first edition of the *Life*.

<sup>3</sup> Napier's *Johnsoniana*, p. 20; Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes of Johnson*, p. 44.

Piozzi could not produce Boswell's *Life of Johnson*! Again, we must keep in mind the weary night hours spent by Boswell in recording the conversations while they were yet fresh in mind, before that "elusive and evanescent" quality had passed from them. When these and other like considerations are borne in mind, Boswell must have, at least in regard to the preparation of the *Life*, the honour due to one who, for the sake of the accomplishment of a great purpose, knew how

" To scorn delights, and live laborious days."

A comparison of Boswell and John Aubrey may not be out of place in this connexion. The two men had many traits of character in common: both were erratic and laughed at by their contemporaries. "He was a shiftless person," wrote Anthony Wood<sup>1</sup> of John Aubrey, "roving and magotieheaded, and sometimes little better than crased. And being exceedingly credulous, would stuff his many letters sent to A. W. with folliries, and misinformations, which sometimes would guid him into the paths of error." The difference between the two men, and, in particular, the superiority of Boswell—that spark of genius within him which his contemporaries did not recognise—is in nothing more clearly emphasised than in the result of their literary efforts. Aubrey left nothing but fragments—highly interesting and most valuable to be sure—but still fragments. Boswell left a great and artistic work which he was bold enough to compare—and not without reason—to one of the world's greatest literary achievements.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In *The Life of Anthony Wood, Written by himself, Athenae Oxonienses*, vol. i. p. lx. edition Philip Bliss, 1813.

<sup>2</sup> "It seems to me, in my moments of self-complacency, that this extensive biographical work, however inferior in its nature, may in one respect be assimilated to the *Odyssey*. Amidst a thousand entertaining and instructive episodes the *Hero* is never long out of sight; for they are all in some degree connected with him; and *He* in the



We may safely conclude that Boswell's work was a work of culmination: he did what other men for long had said should be done, or what they had tried, feebly, to do.<sup>1</sup> Almost the only contribution made by him was the manner and the amount of recorded conversation; nothing equal to it had ever before been known. Yet not for this reason need we detract from Boswell's labours; present-day criticism is telling us that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are but compilations—"culminations," if you will. Those who cast these works into their final forms are sure of their place in the Temple of Fame. Professor Walter Raleigh justly says: "The accident which gave Boswell to Johnson and Johnson to Boswell is one of the most extraordinary pieces of good fortune in literary history. Boswell was a man of genius; the idle paradox which presents him in the likeness of a lucky dunce was never tenable by serious Criticism, and has long since been rejected by all who bring thought to bear on the problems of literature. . . . He had simplicity, candour, fervour, a warmly affectionate nature, a quick intelligence, and a passion for telling all that he knew. These are qualities which make for good literature. They enabled Boswell to portray Johnson with an intimacy and truth that has no parallel in any language. . . . The *Life* would be a lesser work than it is if it had not the unity that was imposed upon it by the mind of its author. The portrait is so broad and masterly, so nobly conceived and

whole course of the History, is exhibited by the Author for the best advantage of his readers."—Advertisement to second edition of the *Life of Johnson*. Cf., also, Percy Fitzgerald: "Mr. Boswell was, in his way, an artist; nothing is more remarkable in his great book than the tact, the self-denial, the power of selection, and the rejection of all that is surplusage."—*Life of James Boswell*, vol. ii. p. 253.

<sup>1</sup> See George Birbeck Hill's interesting, but much too laudatory, article in *Macmillan's Magazine*, May 1891, pp. 37-43; and Percy Fitzgerald's caustic reply to it in the *Life of James Boswell*, vol. ii. pp. 281-4, note.

so faithful in detail, that the world has been content to look at Johnson from this point of view and no other.”<sup>1</sup>

It must not be thought that Boswell produced a perfect life. “It cannot be denied,” continues Professor Raleigh, “and Boswell himself would have been the first to admit it, that there are aspects and periods of Johnson’s career which are not and could not be fully treated in the *Life*.”<sup>2</sup> As has so often been said, the Johnson that Boswell knew was the Johnson of a privileged old age; the lights and shades of those slow years of struggle to fame are not in Boswell’s picture. What might not Richard Savage have painted, or helped Boswell to paint, into that portion of the canvas? For that matter, what might not Goldsmith have done in that direction, who knew so much better than Boswell could ever have known what it meant to try to “set the Thames on fire”? We should not forget, at this point, that Johnson once said, when asked in regard to his probable biographer, that “the dog [Goldsmith] would write his life best to be sure”<sup>3</sup>—meaning of course that Goldsmith would give it most literary grace and charm. We should rejoice that Goldsmith did not live to write it; and should equally rejoice that deficient as the *Life* is in some particulars, its production fell to the lot of James Boswell. More than a half century before Boswell’s *Life* was published, these words of Roger North were given to the public: “If the history of a life hangs altogether upon great importances, such as concern the Church and State, and drops the peculiar economy and private conduct of the person that gives title to the work, it may be a history, and a good one; but of anything rather than of that person’s life. Some may think designs of that nature to be, like the

<sup>1</sup> *Six Essays on Johnson*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Napier’s *Johnsoniana*, p. 15; Mrs. Piozzi’s *Anecdotes of Johnson*, p. 31.

plots of Mr. Bays, good only to bring in fine things: but a life should be a picture; which cannot be good if the peculiar features whereby the subject is distinguished from all others, are left out. Nay, scars and blemishes, as well as beauties, ought to be expressed; otherwise, it is but an outline filled up with roses and lilies."<sup>1</sup> True it is, the *Life of Johnson* is not perfect: it is, however, "a picture"; it is not "an outline filled up with roses and lilies."

From the point of view of style, while the *Life* does not attain the highest rank, it is yet excellent.<sup>2</sup> Although Boswell belonged to the formal school of the eighteenth century, he yet had much of the directness and clarity of Dryden and Addison, and had benefited by the conversation of Johnson and by the style of the *Lives of the Poets*. He was, moreover, in his desire to educate himself away from Scotticisms, a diligent student of English composition. He did not, however, possess the grace and charm of Goldsmith. It would be, perhaps, too much to demand that one man should attain the highest excellence in all departments of literary composition. Boswell had exemplified the method of writing biography; there were yet qualities to be contributed to the general form; the great literary biography—the combination of artistry and lucid, graceful, charming style—was yet to be produced.

Since 1791, the critics have been busy with Boswell. What they have said can in no way influence his finished labours, and their work therefore belongs only to a considera-

<sup>1</sup> *Lives of the Norths*, vol. i. p. 154, edition 1826.

<sup>2</sup> It is not going too far to agree with Percy Fitzgerald: "Too much cannot be said of Boswell's style. We may well wonder where he attained this happy, judicious power of narrative, so limpid and unaffected, and without the least literary realism, or attempt at colouring and 'word-painting.' His phrases and words are admirably chosen, clear and direct without the least pretence. In particular passages, there is dramatic grouping of the highest kind."—*Life of James Boswell*, vol. ii. p. 127.

tion of the development of biography after Boswell's time. The summary of one modern writer may yet be to the purpose here: "By Mason and Boswell a species of literature was introduced into England which was destined to enjoy a popularity that never stood higher than it does at this moment. Biographies had up to this time been perfunctory affairs, either trivial and unessential collections of anecdotes, or else pompous eulogies from which the breath of life was absent.<sup>1</sup> But Mason and Boswell made their heroes paint their own portraits by the skilful interpolation of letters, by the use of anecdotes, by the manipulation of the recollections of others; they adapted to biography the newly discovered formulas of the anti-romantic novelists,<sup>2</sup> and aimed at the production of a figure that should be interesting, lifelike and true. . . . Boswell was a consummate artist, but his sitter gave him a superb opportunity. For the first time, perhaps, in the history of literature, a great leader of intellectual society was able after his death to carry on unabated, and even heightened, the tyrannous ascendancy of his living mind. . . . Never before had the salient points in the character and habits of a man of genius been noted with anything approaching to this exactitude and copiousness, and we ought to be grateful to Boswell for a new species of enjoyment."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is not strictly accurate, as has been shown in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Rather, the novelists adapted the methods of biography.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Modern English Literature*, pp. 252-3. May we not also be grateful that Samuel Parr did not become Johnson's biographer? The Rev. Wm. Field, in his *Memoirs of Parr*, vol. i. pp. 164-5, records Parr's own conception of the task: "' I once intended to write Johnson's *Life*; and I had read through three shelves of books to prepare myself for it. It would have contained a view of the literature of Europe: ' and—making an apology for the proud consciousness which he felt of his own ability—' if I had written it,' continued he, ' it would have been the third most learned work that has ever yet appeared.' To explain himself, he afterwards added, ' The most learned work ever published, I consider Bentley *On the Epistles of Phalaris*; the next, Salmasius on

Thus, at the close of the eighteenth century, did biography culminate in what the world has since been pleased to recognise as the true type. No one with the facts before him can claim for Boswell that he invented a new form, or wrote a perfect specimen of biography; but no one can deny that, although in execution he fell short of perfection (what mortal has yet attained it?), in theory, purpose, plan, he pointed out the ideal. He was not an inventor or discoverer, nor was he a mere theoriser. He was, in the field of biography, a careful student, a diligent worker, and, if not a perfect, at least a scarcely equalled, artist. The producer of the great type did not live long to enjoy his triumph: Boswell died May 19, 1795. The century produced no more great biographies: there were no more Johnsons for subjects; no more Boswells to act as biographers. To the nineteenth century, however, the eighteenth bequeathed a noble legacy.

the Hellenistic language.' On a third occasion, describing the nature of his intended work, and alluding to Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, he said, 'Mine should have been, not the droppings of his lips, but the history of his mind.' "

## CHAPTER VI

## THE RISE OF ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY (720-1799)

As a reader of biography approaches the close of the eighteenth century, he becomes aware that autobiography is assuming a position of the first importance. The statements of Mason, "In a word, Mr. Gray will become his own biographer," and of Boswell, "Had Dr. Johnson written his own life . . . the world would probably have had the most perfect example of biography that was ever exhibited," convince us that biography is sure to become largely autobiographical in method.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary, then, at this point, where the biography and the autobiography join their currents, to trace the rise of the latter form and its development to the close of the eighteenth century.

First of all, the student is impressed by the same backwardness in development that was evident in the case of biography. Practically nothing in the way of autobiography had been published until after the middle of the seventeenth century; most of the early autobiographical documents lay in manuscript until the eighteenth century and after. Moreover, it should never be forgotten that even the word *autobiography* is modern: according to Murray's *New English Dictionary* the first recorded use of the term occurred in 1809.<sup>2</sup> Before this date, the autobiographical form passed

<sup>1</sup> One recalls Longfellow's punning entry in his journal, under date of Feb. 21, 1848: "What is *autobiography*? What biography *ought to be*."—S. Longfellow, *Life of H. W. Longfellow*, vol. ii. p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> "A beautiful anthology may be formed from the Portuguese poets, but they have no great poem in their language. The most interesting, and the one which best pays perusal, has obtained no fame in its own country, and never been heard of beyond it." It is

under various names: *life narrative written by the author himself, memoirs, journal, diary, biography by self, history by self*, etc.

The other important matter to be kept in mind is the fact that the autobiographical element is everywhere to be found in literature. Every time a writer puts pen to paper he is in one way or another, to a greater or less extent, revealing himself. We must, however, in our considerations be careful. There may be autobiography in the Anglo-Saxon poems, *Beowulf*, *Widsith the Far Wanderer*, and *The Lament of Deor*, as well as in many another piece of Old and Early English literature that we might call to mind. Suppose, however, that we were unacquainted with the authorship of Tennyson's *Maud*, and that we should say, in our wisdom, Here is the author giving an account of his own life experiences! The whole system of such inference is dangerous. Are Shakespeare's *Sonnets* autobiographical? Wordsworth tells us <sup>1</sup>

". . . with this key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart;"

to which Browning replies <sup>2</sup>

" Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he! "

After careful study and research, Sidney Lee has reached " the conviction that Shakespeare's collection of sonnets has no reasonable title to be regarded as a personal or autobiographical narrative." <sup>3</sup> And thus it goes. Unless we are certain, it is the part of wisdom not to claim as autobio-

the life of Francisco Vieira, the painter, the best artist of his age, composed by himself. Much has been written concerning the lives of painters; and it is singular that this very amusing and unique specimen of auto-biography should have been entirely overlooked." —Robert Southey, *Quarterly Review*, vol. i. p. 283, May 1809. See also p. 386 of the same volume where " auto-biography " again occurs.

<sup>1</sup> In *Scorn not the Sonnet*.

<sup>2</sup> In *House*.

<sup>3</sup> *Life of Shakespeare*, p. viii.

graphical that which may not be so.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, therefore, we shall limit ourselves to those productions which are truly autobiographic, or, at the least, autobiographic in intention.

So far as this form is concerned, the Latin period is much less important, and therefore far more negligible than was the case in our consideration of biography. Ecgwin (or Egwin), Bishop of Worcester, who died about 720 A.D., is reported by later biographers<sup>2</sup> to have written his own life and is, for this reason, sometimes called the first English autobiographer. Henry Morley, in his *English Writers*, humorously suggests that Ecgwin might, on account of the many impossible tales of miracles which he told, "possibly be otherwise ranked with greater truth as the first English artist in prose fiction."<sup>3</sup> When we come to the Venerable Bede, however, we have a genuine piece of self-biography—brief though it may be—written about 731. This sketch is appended to the *Ecclesiastical History of England* (sect. 454) and reads thus:

"Being born in the territory of that same monastery [of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, which is at Wearmouth and Jarrow], I was given by the care of my relatives, at seven years of age, to be educated by the most reverend abbot Benedict, and afterwards by Ceolfrid; and from that period, spending all the remaining time of my life in that monastery, I wholly applied myself to the study of the Scriptures; and amidst the observance of regular discipline, and the daily care of singing in the Church, I always took delight in learning, teaching, and writing. In the nineteenth year of my age I received deacon's orders; in the thirtieth, those of the priesthood; both of them by

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<sup>1</sup> I have read Percy Fitzgerald's interesting and ingenious volume, *Boswell's Autobiography*, the main thesis of which is that the *Life of Johnson* was put forth as "a disguised life of Boswell himself." For many reasons, I confess myself unconverted to Mr. Fitzgerald's opinion.

<sup>2</sup> See *Chronicon Abbatiae de Evesham, ad annum 1418*. Edited by William Dunn Macray, 1863 (Rolls Series).

<sup>3</sup> Vol. i. pp. 338-40.



the ministry of the most reverend bishop John, and by order of the abbot Ceolfrid. From which time, when I received the order of priesthood, till the fifty-ninth year of my age, I have made it my business, for the use of me and mine, briefly to compile out of the works of the venerable Fathers, and to interpret and explain according to their meaning, (adding somewhat of my own,) these following pieces:—[here follows a list of his works].”<sup>1</sup>

For our purpose, we need not linger amid the welter of Latin church documents in the centuries which succeeded Bede. They contain little of intrinsic value as documents of self-revelation, and have exerted no influence on autobiography written in English. Bede's sketch is the prototype of all such attempts at autobiography among early churchmen. “In the Middle Ages,” writes Professor Walter Raleigh, “a writer was wholly identified with his work. His personal habits and private vicissitudes of fortune excited little curiosity: Vincent of Beauvais and Godfrey of Viterbo are the names not so much of two men as of two books. Literature was regarded as the chief means of preserving and promulgating ancient truths and traditions; and authors were mechanical scribes, recorders, and compilers. The distinction between fact and fiction, which we make to-day with so airy a confidence, was hardly known to the mediaeval writer. . . . While this was the dominant conception of art and of science, of history and of literature, authors were, in every sense of the word, a humble class. When it was their function to instruct, they were conduit pipes for the wisdom of the ages: where they set themselves to amuse, they held a rank not far above that of the professional jesters and minstrels who were attached as servitors to the household of some great lord or king.”<sup>2</sup> From such men we do not look for any valuable self-records or introspective documents. To all practical intent,

<sup>1</sup> Translation of Stevenson, in *The Church Historians of England*.

<sup>2</sup> *Six Essays on Johnson*, pp. 98-100.

therefore, from the point of view of autobiography, the period from 731 to 1573 may be regarded as a long blank.

Nor, for the same reason, need we linger long over the autobiographies written in Latin by other than churchmen. Among them is one, however, that for several reasons should not be neglected—the work of Thomas Dempster, the Scotchman, whom we have already mentioned as the compiler of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Scotorum*. Dempster himself looms up out of the past as one who was almost super-man—“tall above the stature of common men; with black hair, and skin well-nigh of the same colour; his head immense, and his aspect kingly; his strength and courage equal to that of a soldier” (“*Caeterum fuit Dempsterus vir corpore, & animo egregius; altitudo illi super mediocrem vulgaris hominis magnitudinem; coma subnigrior, & cuti color non longè dispar; caput magnum ac totius corporis habitus plane regius; robur, & ferocitas, quibus vel praestantissimum militem praestare posset, reque ipsa saepius se talem exhibuit*”)—to adopt the words of his friend, a certain Matthaëus Peregrinus, who added a supplement to Dempster’s *Autobiography*. This formidable giant, described by Rossi as “a man formed for war and contention, who hardly ever allowed a day to pass without fighting, either with his sword or his fists,” seems to have been equally intense in applying himself to mental labour, it being no uncommon thing, according to Peregrinus, for him to spend fourteen hours a day in reading (“*Indefessus in legendo, ita, ut quatuordecim diei horas librorum lectionem se continuare solitum mihi saepe retulerit*”). Peregrinus further states that Dempster’s memory was such that he could give the context of any passage from Greek or Latin quoted to him (“*non versus poetae alicuius non sensum alterius scriptoris, seu Graeci, seu Latini (aeque enim utrumque*

norat,) quem statim cum longa verborum praecedentium, ac sequentum serie verbatim referre non posset").

Dempster's *Autobiography* is just what we should expect from such a man, and it may well be that his friend Peregrinus followed him in habits of exaggeration and falsehood. The narrative is not long, but across its pages flash gleams of a laborious, tempestuous, grotesque career, darkened now and then by shadows of those wild days in Scotland and other European countries. There are in the work, as well in the main story and the minor episodes as in the manner of the narrative, the germs of much fiction: how much is true, how much is fabrication, we do not know. At the very outset, Dempster tells us that he was one of three children at a single birth, the twenty-fourth of twenty-nine children, and that five of the most important events of his life happened on the anniversary of his birth ("*Thomas Dempsterus . . . natus est . . . partu tergemino vigesimus quartus è liberis viginti novem quos ex una uxore pater sustulit anno MDlxxix, ipso pervigilio D. Bartholomaei, quo die veluti fatali patriam deseruit, lauream in iure Doctoratus est assecutus, Academiae Nemausensi adscriptus, difficilis Tolosae litis exitum optatum sortitus, demum Serenissimi Magni Hetruriae Ducis Academicis adnumeratus Pisanis*").

As an example of his remarkable precocity, he assures us that at the age of three years he mastered the alphabet in the brief space of one hour ("*triennis omnia elementa unius horae spatio exacte didicit*"). Henry Bradley says <sup>1</sup> "there seems reason to suspect that he may have dated his birth a few years too late with the very object of enhancing the marvel of his youthful precocity in learning," and continues with the remark that "if the date assigned by him be correct, his career is certainly extraordinary, even for an age which abounded in juvenile prodigies." The ability

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, article "Thomas Dempster."

to see a good story, indeed, was inherent in Dempster's nature. We have only to mention the episode in the life of his brother James. In a few lines, bristling with suggestion, Dempster tells us how James incurred his father's hatred by marrying Isabella Gordon, the father's mistress; and how, later, James, collecting a band of wild Gordons, his wife's kinsmen, made an attack upon his father's retinue in a lonely region, where two were killed on either side, many were wounded, and the father left with seven bullets in his leg and a sword cut on his head. Without doubt, Dempster's story of his own life—whether it be true to the letter or fiction to the core—is the most readable article in his laboured volume.<sup>1</sup> Its very manner and content earn for it a place among autobiographies composed by Britons.

Autobiography in English dates from the poetical narrative of Thomas Tusser, published in its first form in 1573 as a part of the author's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*. The manner of the work may be judged from the following stanzas:

“ It came to pass, that born I was  
Of lineage good, of gentle blood,  
In Essex layer, in village fair,  
That Rivenhall hight:  
Which village ly'd, by Banktree side;  
There spend did I mine infancy,  
There then my name, in honest fame,  
Remain'd in sight.

“ From Paul's I went, to Eton sent,  
To learn straightways, the Latin phrase,  
Where fifty-three stripes, given to me  
At once I had,  
For fault but small, or none at all,  
It came to pass, thus beat I was:  
See, Udall, see, the mercy of thee,  
To me, poor lad.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography* is the last article in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Scotorum*.

“ To London hence, to Cambridge thence  
With thanks to thee, O Trinity,  
That to thy Hall, so passing all,  
    I got at last.  
There joy I felt, there trim I dwelt,  
There heaven from hell, I shifted well  
With learned men, a number then,  
    The time I past.”<sup>1</sup>

In this jingling, somewhat vague manner, without dates and usually without any careful reference to places or particulars, Tusser continues through forty stanzas to relate the outward events of his life. Thus much he gave as his “Life.” We can learn far more of the inner man from his statement of the “Principal Points of Religion” and “The Author’s Belief” than from the “Life” poem. This fact only demonstrates that we have made an advance in our demands upon autobiographers: whereas it used to be the custom to set forth outward events, it is to-day the custom to reveal, so far, of course, as it may be possible for the author to reveal, the inner man—to give the breath of distinguishing individuality. This much may be said by way of anticipation: it remains to be seen how long autobiography continued to be objective.

After Tusser, we have four brief autobiographies published within a reasonably short time after their composition. The few pages of the *Life of Sir Thomas Bodley* were, as he records, “written with mine own hand, Anno 1609, December 11th,” although they were not printed until 1647. The oldest prose autobiography in English, therefore, reckoning from date of composition, Sir Thomas Bodley’s *Life* ranks second in date of publication. It was preceded by *An Apology written by Richard Vennar of Lincolnes Inne, abusively called England’s Joy*, printed in

<sup>1</sup> Stanzas 3, 8, and 9, from *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* (London, 1812), pp. 315-7.

London in 1614.<sup>1</sup> Vennar wrote his *Apology* to defend himself against charges of "slander, deceit, fraud, and cozenage," or, as he declares on the title-page, "to repress the contagious ruptures of the infected multitude," incited against him by the questionable management of his play *England's Joy*, and by other unfortunate circumstances of which his life seems to have been only too full. While Vennar gives much information in regard to himself throughout the *Apology*, only the first part is avowedly autobiographical, and the whole of the production is marked by the dominant note of defence which occasioned its composition. The autobiographical fragment of Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle appeared originally in a scarce and curious folio called *Nature's Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*, printed in London, 1656. Ten years later, in 1666, the first edition of John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* was given to the public. Thus, within the period of practically a century after the appearance of Thomas Tusser's poetical effort, the reading public had only these four works to satisfy whatever appetite for autobiography it may have had. With the exception of Bunyan's work, the other sketches are only brief narratives of events, domestic or political. There seems to have been, in truth, a desire on the part of all writers to reserve anything in the nature of a record of the inner life. Sir Thomas Bodley mentions "some other private reasons, which I reserve unto myself." Margaret Cavendish says: "But now I have declared to my readers my birth, breeding, and actions to this part of my life, I mean the material parts," and then assures us

<sup>1</sup> The British Museum Library contains what is said to be the only perfect copy of this book. J. P. Collier has reprinted it in vol. iii. of his *Illustrations of Old English Literature*, in the introduction to which he erroneously states that it is "the oldest piece of prose autobiography in our language."

that she has written the account simply "for my own sake . . . lest after ages should mistake in not knowing I was . . . second wife to the Lord Marquis of Newcastle; for my Lord having had two wives, I might easily have been mistaken, especially if I should die and my Lord marry again." Bunyan, on the other hand, reduces to the minimum references to mere worldly affairs. "It is not his autobiography, but his religious feelings and experiences that he records." We see, in these works, a foreshadowing of the two types of later autobiography: the one type, the record chiefly of outward events, the writer considering himself merely a part of the historical current; the other, the record of inner events, of the soul's struggles on the journey through life, the writer considering himself as individual, well-nigh isolated.

We come now to a consideration of the delayed publication of early autobiographies; a condition of affairs analogous to that which we have already considered in the case of a number of early biographies. The seventeenth century produced a considerable number of autobiographical documents, few of which were given to the public until well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The following table will at once indicate the extent of this delay in the case of seventeen of the more important works:

	Died.	Autobiography first printed.
Lucy Hutchinson . . . .	1620	1806
Lord Herbert of Cherbury . . . .	1648	1764
Sir Simonds D'Ewes . . . .	1650	1845
Sir Kenelm Digby . . . .	1665	1827
Robert Blair . . . .	1666	1754 (fragments)
Edward Hyde Lord Clarendon . . . .	1674	1759
James Fraser of Brae . . . .	1699	1738
John Livingstone . . . .	1672	1754
Walter Pringle . . . .	1667	1723
Anne Harrison Lady Fanshawe . . . .	1680	1829
William Lilly . . . .	1681	1715

	Died.	Autobiography first printed.
Anthony Ashley Cooper Lord Shaftesbury . . . . .	1683	1859
James Melvill . . . . .	1614	1829
Sir James Melville of Hallhill . . . . .	1617	1683
Sir John Reresby . . . . .	1689	1734 (in part)
John Bramston . . . . .	1700	1845
Anne Lady Halkett . . . . .	1699	1875 (at length)

Such delay, of course, interfered with any contemporaneous and continuous development of the autobiographical type. So long as these documents lay in manuscript there could be no criticism to direct, no comparative study, nothing to whet the desire for improvement of the type, no school (if we may so term it) of autobiography. The manner of the narrative would thus depend upon the whim of the writer; or, at least, would follow closely the bent of his mind. There would be no regular flow of autobiographical record; the impulse to record one's own life would manifest itself only at intervals. "Undeniably, autobiographical writing in England—with the single exception of the Quaker group—is sporadic until the end of the seventeenth century."<sup>1</sup>

The Quaker group, of which mention has just been made, is "unconnected with the secular personal records of the time." Mrs. Anna Robeson Burr, in her valuable and highly suggestive book, *The Autobiography*, has given the results of her careful study of this group. Little more can be done here than to give her statements. "The English Quakers form a continuous and compact group, running steadily, without variation in manner or method from 1624 to 1840. No other religious movement has left so large a mass of classified material. The autobiographical intention with the early Friends became a dogma, as it were, of their belief, and to leave behind a journal or an autobiography was almost a requirement of faith. The Quaker journals form in

<sup>1</sup> Burr, *The Autobiography*, p. 206.



themselves a complete library: they are full of incident and adventure on land and sea, in the old world and the new; and they display upon every page qualities of courage and steadfastness, of simplicity and kindness which move the heart. At the same time, they show a common lack of imagination in dealing with their creed; there is astonishingly little vitality to their religious expression. When they write of perplexities, of conversion, of prayer, of meeting, they all employ the same style, the same terms of expression. In such passages it is hard to tell if you are reading Woolman, or Ellwood, Chalkley, Davies, Edmundson, or Crook. Though there exists the quaintest individuality in the character of these men, yet the religious colour of their minds appears to be as uniform and as dun-coloured as was the prescribed dress of their society. The stamp of George Fox is upon every piece of these differing metals, and we are led, therefore, back to Fox's Journal, not only as an influential personal narrative, but as the earliest important self-study in English, and one of the few later documents which has an influence approaching that of our three primary types [Caesar's *Commentaries*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Jerome Cardan's *De Vita Propria Liber*]."<sup>1</sup>

It is no part of our purpose to discuss in detail the various autobiographies that have been mentioned. Having thus far pointed out the general trend of autobiographical narrative as far as the Quaker group, we may now turn to a consideration of a few of the outstanding characteristics of the more noteworthy examples—those which, by reason of certain intrinsic merits, command our attention. Just as the autobiography of the period is sporadic, so are its manifestations diverse. The full and free play of individuality is clearly seen in the manner of these early narratives.

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography*, pp. 235-6 and 418. See the Appendix, pp. 298-9, for a list of the Quaker narratives.

In any consideration of autobiography the *Life of Lord Herbert of Cherbury written by himself* will ever occupy a conspicuous place, and with it we may here begin. This narrative, written when its author was past sixty, was probably never completed. Lord Herbert carefully states his reason for undertaking the task: "I have thought fit to relate to my posterity those passages of my life which I conceive may best declare me, and be most useful to them." "*Those passages of my life which best declare me*": this purpose the writer kept carefully before his mind, and what he set out to do, he did. "Foibles, passions, perhaps some vanity, surely some wrong-headedness; these he scorned to conceal, for he sought truth, wrote on truth, was truth: he honestly told when he had missed or mistaken it." He puts down in black and white what most men would wish to conceal. There is withal a bold sweep to Lord Herbert's narrative which carries the reader steadily forward. The restless, reckless spirit of the man, evidently liking a good fight as well as a good meal, is seen in almost every page. We recognise him, at once, as akin to those other spirits of his age—Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh—and catch a vision of the fulness of life which made England the leading nation of the earth. "This is perhaps the most extraordinary account that ever was given seriously by a wise man of himself," wrote Horace Walpole: an opinion with which all who read Lord Herbert's life narrative must agree.

In the *Private Memoirs of Sir Kenelm Digby* we have a narrative remarkable for a different reason. From the point of view of inception, purpose, and method Digby's narrative is unusual. It was written, he tells us, in "the few empty spaces of tedious hours, which would have been in danger to have been worse filled if I had not taken hold of this occasion of diversion." In short, Sir Kenelm asserts

that he wrote the *Memoirs* "without any art or care," to preserve his virtue. "You that read, then," he continues, "may take notice that after a long and violent storm which took me between Rhodes and Candie, and separated me from all the vessels of my fleet, it was my misfortune to fall in with the island of Milo; where, while I stayed to mend the defects of a leaky ship, and to expect the relics of the tempest's fury, I was courteously invited ashore by a person of quality of that place. . . . I passed my time there with much solitude, and my best entertainment was with my own thoughts; which being contrary to the manner of most men, unless it be when melancholy hath seized their minds, who deem no state delightful that is not quickened by exterior pleasures, I soon perceived that my courteous host was much troubled at my retirement, and omitted nothing that might avail to divert me from it; and among other things, made me a liberal offer to interest me in the good graces of several of the most noted beauties of that place, who in all ages have been known to be no niggards of their favours, which might peradventure have been welcomely accepted by another that had like me had youth, strength, and a long time of being at sea to excuse him if he had yielded to such a temptation. But I, that had fresh in my soul the idea of so divine and virtuous a beauty [his wife] that others, in balance with hers, did but show the weakness and misery of their sex, thought it no mastery to overcome it: but yet was in some perplexity how to refuse my friend's courtesy, without seeming uncivil. In the end . . . I concluded that the best way for me would be to pretend some serious business, which of necessity did call upon me to write many dispatches, and into several places . . . but my facility of setting down on paper my low conceptions having been ever very great, I soon made an end of what concerned business. . . . I deemed it both a good

diversion for the present, and pains that would hereafter administer me much content, to set down in writing my wandering fantasies.”<sup>1</sup> The narrative is almost wholly an account of the love between himself and his wife, the Lady Venetia Stanley, “whose memory begot this discourse.” “I will set down,” writes Digby at the outset, “in the best manner that I can, the beginning, progress and consummation of that excellent love which only makes me believe that our pilgrimage in this world is not indifferently laid upon all persons for a curse.” The work is necessarily, therefore, a combination of biography and autobiography, and in manner approaches fiction. Digby uses assumed names for all the characters and places mentioned in his narrative. It is but a step from his method to pure autobiographical fiction. Sir Kenelm left directions that after his death the manuscript of this narrative should be “converted into a clear flame.” “That the manuscript was not destroyed,” writes the editor of the printed work, “is fortunate for those who are gratified by perusing the description which genius gives of itself, as well as for Digby’s memory, as it contains many facts highly creditable to his character, and tends, in some degree, to redeem that of his wife; whilst much light is thrown by it upon the early part of his career. As a piece of autobiography it is, perhaps, one of the most extraordinary which is extant, and every line bears striking evidence of the peculiar temper and still more singular opinions of the writer.”<sup>2</sup>

The most elaborate life-narrative to come to print before the close of the seventeenth century was the *Reliquiae Baxterianae: or Mr. Richard Baxter’s Narrative of the most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times*. This great work was written in instalments by Baxter between 1664 and the

<sup>1</sup> *Private Memoirs of Sir Kenelm Digby*, 1827, pp. 321-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. xliii-xlv.

time of his death in 1691. It was "faithfully published from his own original manuscripts by Matthew Sylvester," at London, in 1696. It is a monumental work: in the words of the editor, "You have here the history of God's early, kind and powerful dealings with him . . . of his ministerial self . . . and some tastes and informations of his thoughts and studies; and of his books and letters to divers persons of different stations and quality, and also of what pens and spirits wrote against him." It is not, however, in the personal record that Sylvester was interested, and here we get the notion of a contemporary opinion of the purpose and value of autobiography. "But the great things," writes the editor, "which are the spirit of this history are the accounts he gives of the original springs and sources of all these revolutions, distractions, and disasters which happened from the Civil Wars betwixt King Charles the First, to the Restoration of Charles the Second, and what was consequent after thereupon to Church and State."

It was the desire of Edmund Calamy to edit these *Reliquiae Baxterianae* and to reproduce them in the form of an abridgment. "Mr. Orme," writes Sir James Stephen, "laments the obstinacy of the author's literary executor, which forbade the execution of this design. Few who know the book will agree with him. A strange chaos indeed it is. But Grainger has well said of the writer, that 'men of his size are not to be drawn in miniature.' Large as life, and finished to the most minute detail, his own portrait, from his own hand, exhibits to the curious in such things a delineation of which they would not willingly spare a single stroke, and which would have lost all its force and freedom if reduced and varnished by any other limner, however practised, or however felicitous. There he stands, an intellectual giant as he was, playing with his quill as Hercules with the distaff, his very sport a labour under which any one but

himself would have staggered. Towards the close of the first book occurs a passage, which, though often republished, and familiar to most students of English literature, must yet be noticed as the most impressive record in our language, if not in any tongue, of the gradual ripening of a powerful mind under the culture of incessant study, wide experience, and anxious self-observation. Mental anatomy, conducted by a hand at once so delicate and so firm, and comparisons, so exquisitely just, between the impressions and impulses of youth, and the tranquil conclusion of old age, bring his career of strife and trouble to a close of unexpected and welcome serenity. In the full maturity of such knowledge as is to be acquired on earth of the mysteries of our mortal and of our immortal existence, the old man returns at last for repose to the elementary truths, the simple lessons, and the confiding affections of his childhood; and writes an unintended commentary, of unrivalled force and beauty, on the inspired declaration, that to 'become as little children' is the indispensable, though arduous, condition of attaining the true heavenly wisdom. To substitute for this self-portraiture any other analysis<sup>1</sup> of Baxter's intellectual and moral character would be a vain attempt."<sup>2</sup>

The predominating historical features of the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* are characteristic of the later life narratives of Sir Simonds D'Ewes, Edward Hyde Lord Clarendon, Sir James Melville of Hallhill, Sir John Resesby, Anthony Ashley Cooper Lord Shaftesbury, and a number of others of lesser importance. So far as there is a common element

<sup>1</sup> Both Calamy and William Orme have produced abridgments of the work. Calamy remarks: "I have reduced things to that method which appeared to me most proper. *Personal reflections and little privacies I have dropped*" [*italics are mine*]. *An Abridgement of Mr. Richard Baxter's History of his Life and Times*: By Edmund Calamy, 1702. Calamy cast the whole into the third person.

<sup>2</sup> *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, vol. ii. pp. 59-61 (3rd ed.).

binding all these autobiographical documents together, it may be seen in the subordination of the subjective, personal account to the record of contemporary history. Autobiography is yet under the domination of history. In this particular, the development of the form runs parallel to that of biography.

In view of the fact that *The Journal of George Fox* is the great prototype of that large body of Quaker autobiographical literature which continued until near the middle of the nineteenth century, we need take it alone into consideration here. The "Great Journall" was prepared by Fox for the purpose of giving to the public a record of his ministry and of his religious experience—it is a religious autobiography. It was first prepared for printing by Thomas Ellwood, Milton's friend and pupil, and appeared with a preface written by William Penn, in 1694; in 1911 the manuscript was reproduced for the first time in its entirety. In the words of T. Edmund Harvey, it "was doubtless regarded by George Fox rather as the rough material than the final form of the work to be printed after his death. . . . We may ask ourselves how far *The Journal* as we now possess it enables us to form an accurate portrait of Fox as a man. We gain many little details which hitherto were lacking; here and there we may regret a certain note of seeming harshness, or what appears to be too great an insistence on Fox's personal part in the story. But this is more than counterbalanced by the intense reality of all the narrative: it is instinct with a sense of truthfulness. . . . In one other most important respect the portrait of George Fox given us in his *Journal* is incomplete and must be supplemented by contemporary correspondence and the evidence of those who knew him. We realise, as we read his narrative, something of the magnetic power which attracted his hearers, but only here and there have we a

glimpse of that tenderer side of his nature of which we read elsewhere. . . . Hardly more than a hint is given in *The Journal* of his strong family affection. . . . But this was inevitable from the nature of *The Journal*, which was never intended to be an autobiography in the full sense of the word. Yet if the picture which *The Journal* gives is necessarily incomplete, it is more living and convincing than many a fuller portrait of themselves which other writers have left. As we read its pages there stands out clearly before us the great, strong personality of its writer, with all his shrewdness and simplicity, his untiring devotion to his message and his power of passing it on to others. The prophet's fire, the wise man's counsel, stirring record of hardships bravely borne, quaint and homely touches of human kindness, all are here." <sup>1</sup>

We have now seen that from the first brief accounts of domestic or political events—the records of the merely objective—autobiography has steadily shown a tendency to become more detailed and subjective. The religious type of autobiography as exemplified in *The Journal of George Fox* deepened the consciousness of the inner, subjective life. Man was beginning to study himself as apart from the great stream of humanity. In the eighteenth century, contemporaneous with the Quaker group of religious autobiographers, we find "the first small cluster of genuinely scientific self-students." <sup>2</sup> This cluster is composed of seven whose works are similar in idea and in method: John Flamsteed, Edmund Calamy, Roger North, David Hume, Benjamin Franklin, Edward Gibbon, and Joseph Priestley, of whom Franklin has been accounted greatest. Four others of this cluster, John Dunton, William Whiston, George

<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of George Fox*: edited from the MSS. by Norman Penney. With an introduction by T. Edmund Harvey. Cambridge, 1911. Vol. i. pp. xxvii-xxx.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, pp. 299-300.



Whitefield, and Henry Alline, have written religious confessions wholly independent as to creed.

Edmund Calamy, D.D., of whom we have already spoken in connexion with the *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, upon his death in 1731 left an extended historical account of his life which was not printed until 1829. It is significant of the place that self-narrative was assuming at this period, as well as of the care that was taken to study such models as then existed, to find that Calamy devotes a long introduction, occupying fifty-one pages in the printed edition, to a discussion of both foreign and English models of autobiography. After this discussion of all such works as were known to him, he states that it is his intention "to give what account I am able of the most noted passages of my life; the Providence of God towards me, the times I have lived in, and the remarks I have made on what occurred, as far as it fell under my notice." The work shows that Calamy was yet under the bondage of history, his long narrative, like that of Richard Baxter, being much devoted to the "record of the times in which he lived."

David Hume, Benjamin Franklin, and Edward Gibbon begin a new era. These three men in their comparatively brief, pointed, well-written narratives, break away from the bondage of history and write of themselves. Here first we see a clear-cut, definite sense of proportion: we see David Hume, Benjamin Franklin, and Edward Gibbon occupying the centre of the picture, with all other persons properly subordinated, and all other events, save those which closely and intimately influenced them or were influenced by them, duly reduced to the minimum. Of the three works, only that of Hume was left in finished form for publication; his work, too, is the briefest of the three. Hume's brevity was a part of his plan: "It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself without vanity, therefore I

shall be short." His further statement, that "this narrative shall contain little more than the history of my writings, as indeed almost all my life has been spent in literary pursuits and occupations," shows us that literary autobiographers were under the same spell as were the biographers of literary men of this period (1766). The purely literary life was thought to be hardly worth recording.

Franklin's *Autobiography* is one of the most straightforward and unstudied narratives of its kind in the English language, if not in the world. Franklin was not overwhelmed by any sense of his own greatness, nor did he have any false pride or desire to represent events in his life as of more importance than they really were. In consequence, he has given us a human document of the greatest value: from it we are able to learn Franklin, the man. Franklin, the philosopher; Franklin, the statesman; Franklin, the philanthropist—these were but manifestations of Franklin, the man; and we are able clearly to understand these manifestations only as we understand the man beneath them all. Francis Jeffrey evidently missed this great truth. Jeffrey confessed that the *Autobiography* was "written with great simplicity and liveliness," yet found fault with it because it "contains too many trifling details and anecdotes of obscure individuals."<sup>1</sup> In other words, had Franklin written a long impersonal account of the most important events of his life, Jeffrey would no doubt have applauded the performance. Franklin, however, sure of himself, proceeded in his own way: he knew that man's life is made up mostly of "trifling details," and that the manner in which any man conducts himself in a critical moment is determined by the manner in which he has conducted himself in thousands of smaller

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, July 1806; Jeffrey's *Contributions to Edinburgh Review*, vol. i. p. 156.

transactions in the past. He knew that the Franklin who "stood before kings" was the same Franklin who entered Philadelphia eating one roll while he carried the others under his arms. We can imagine him in his old age looking back with greater pleasure to his youthful entrance into Philadelphia than to the triumphs of his later years. He did not forget to tell us how the small events conspired to make him great. For this, among many other reasons, Franklin's *Autobiography* takes its place in the forefront of such narratives, and remains one of the great books of all time.

Franklin's work constitutes the one classic American autobiography. "It is strange," comments Mrs. Burr, "that this example should be at once so distinctive and so typical, even at that date, of a separate nationality. Typical it still remains, for even now the ideal American is Franklin in little. The figure he presents—prudent, sagacious, prosperous—above all prosperous—with a healthy moral code not in the least fanatic or strained; with humour, energy, and importance in affairs—is not this still the American ideal at its best? Franklin, that large embodiment of somewhat small virtues, has left us a balanced and complete self-delineation, after reading which we have but one regret—that his are qualities which do not bear reduction from the heroic standard. It is not easy to say whether the influence of his record has been more hurtful or useful. Its balance is extraordinary: the writer is wholly reasonable; he is moved by common sense; he is consistently utilitarian in every event of his life. His attitude towards what he terms his *errata* is as gentle as we could wish it possible to be towards our own. Interesting and significant is the fact that his first *erratum* is a 'violation of trust respecting money'; which might well be written in black and white letters over the whole United States, from Maine

to California." Not without reason does Mrs. Burr close with the fervent wish, "Could we have pointed, as the quintessence of our national character, but to some courageous idealist!"<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to record that Franklin's *Autobiography* was first printed in a French translation in 1791. "From this point," affirms John Bigelow, "the history of this manuscript is a succession of surprises, which has scarce any parallel in ancient or modern bibliography, with the possible exception of the writings of Aristotle and the *Table Talk* of Martin Luther." The manuscript consists of four parts: the first was written during Franklin's residence in England as agent of the Colonies, in 1771, and covers that part of his life from his birth in 1706 to his marriage in 1730; to this point it was written for the gratification of his family. The second part, undertaken at the solicitation of friends, was written at Passy, while Franklin was Minister to France. The third portion was begun in August 1788, after Franklin's return to Philadelphia, and brings the narrative down to 1757. This third portion ends the *Autobiography* so far as printed to 1867, when John Bigelow edited the first edition ever printed from the original manuscript, which edition contained a fourth part, consisting of a few pages written in 1789. Mr. Bigelow, who was fortunate enough to secure in France the original Franklin manuscript, made a careful study of the different published versions of the *Autobiography*, and in 1909 published the story of the fortunes of the manuscript in an introduction to a new edition of the narrative.<sup>2</sup>

It is remarkable, yet characteristic of most English autobiography, that two of the greatest of such works have

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography*, pp. 209-10.

<sup>2</sup> *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. The Unmutilated and Correct Version. Compiled and edited, with notes, by John Bigelow. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

come to us in an unfinished—almost fragmentary—state. Franklin wrote hurriedly and unstudiedly with no eye to publication. Edward Gibbon, on the other hand, experimented with and elaborated his life-story most carefully; yet he, like Franklin, left the parts to be forged together by another hand.

Between 1788 and 1793, Gibbon wrote six different sketches of his life, and a seventh fragmentary sketch. These sketches "are not quite continuous; they partly recount the same incidents in different form; they are written in different tones; and yet no one of them is complete; none of them seemed plainly designed to supersede the rest." These sketches were put in order by Lord Sheffield and as the *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon* were published in 1799. Not until 1894 was the public given the complete text of Gibbon's narrative. "A piece most elaborately composed by one of the greatest writers who ever used our language, an autobiography often pronounced to be the best we possess, is now proved to be in no sense the simple work of that illustrious pen, but to have been dexterously pieced together out of seven fragmentary sketches and adapted into a single and coherent narrative."<sup>1</sup> One note which Gibbon appended to a part of his narrative indicates his attitude towards much of the autobiography that appeared before his death. "It would most assuredly be in my power," he writes, "to amuse the reader with a gallery of portraits and a collection of anecdotes; but I have always condemned the practice of transforming a private memorial into a vehicle of satire and praise." The emphasis which Gibbon here

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*. With an Introduction by the Earl of Sheffield. Edited by John Murray. "The reader may now rest assured that, for the first time, he has before him the autobiographic sketches of Edward Gibbon in the exact form in which he left them at his death."

insists should be thrown on the person who is the subject of the autobiography completed for the eighteenth century the line of organic development and established for the future a canon of unity which, if not always followed, is yet permanently recognised as binding.

We have already seen how the public interest in biography had grown and developed to the middle of the eighteenth century. A similar interest in autobiography, long recognised simply as a branch of biography and long known as self-biography, ran parallel with the interest in pure biography. In 1759, Johnson put the stamp of his authority on the form in an *Idler* essay:

“ Those relations are therefore commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story. He that recounts the life of another commonly dwells most upon conspicuous events, lessens the familiarity of his tale to increase its dignity, shows his favourite at a distance decorated and magnified like the ancient actors in their tragic dress, and endeavours to hide the man that he may produce a hero.

“ But if it be true which was said by a French prince, That no man was a hero to the servants of his chamber, it is equally true that every man is yet less a hero to himself. He that is most elevated above the crowd by the importance of his employments, or the reputation of his genius, feels himself affected by fame or business but as they influence his domestic life. The high and low, as they have the same faculties and the same senses, have no less similitude in their pains and pleasures. The sensations are the same in all, though produced by very different occasions. The prince feels the same pain when an invader seizes a province, as the farmer when a thief drives away his cow. Men thus equal in themselves will appear equal in honest and impartial biography; and those whom fortune or nature place at the greatest distance may afford instruction to each other.

“ The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another.

“ Certainty of knowledge not only excludes mistake, but fortifies veracity. What we collect by conjecture, and by conjecture only can one man judge of another’s motives or sentiments, is easily modified by fancy or by desire; as objects imperfectly discerned take forms from the hope or fear of the beholder. But that which is fully known cannot be falsified but with reluctance of understanding, and alarm of conscience: of understanding, the lover of truth; of conscience, the sentinel of virtue.

“ He that writes the life of another is either his friend or his enemy, and wishes either to exalt his praise or aggravate his infamy; many temptations to falsehood will occur in the disguise of passions, too specious to fear much resistance. Love of virtue will animate panegyric, and hatred of wickedness embitter censure. The zeal of gratitude, the ardour of patriotism, fondness for an opinion, or fidelity to a party, may easily overpower the vigilance of a mind habitually well disposed, and prevail over unassisted and unfriended veracity.

“ But he that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed that we are on the watch against its artifices. He that writes an apology for a single action, to confute an accusation, to recommend himself to favour, is indeed always to be suspected of favouring his own cause; but he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb.”<sup>1</sup>

Not only was autobiography thus shaping the course of biography, it was having a strong influence as well upon the direction of English fiction. Mrs. Burr contends that “ to claim that the imaginary autobiography—*Robinson Crusoe*, let us say—owes its being to some genuine autobiography would be to claim too much.” When we see, however, that biography shaped the course of much early fiction and that autobiography preceded the autobiographical novel, we must conclude that at least the spirit of biography and autobiography was so potent at this time as to give direction to the fiction. A careful student of English fiction has given it as his opinion that “ a quick

<sup>1</sup> *Idler*, No. 84, November 24, 1759.

offshoot of the biography was the autobiography, which, as a man in giving a sympathetic account of himself is likely to run into poetry, came very close to being a novel [as in the case of Sir Kenelm Digby]. . . . Margaret Duchess of Newcastle's *Autobiography*, published in 1656 in a volume of tales, is a famous account of a family in which 'all the brothers were brave, and all the sisters virtuous.' Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* is a story of the fierce struggles between the spirit and the flesh, and of the final triumph of the spirit. This autobiographical method of dealing with events, partly or wholly fictitious, has been a favourite with all our novelists, except with the very greatest; and it is more employed to-day than ever before."<sup>1</sup>

As we come to the end of the eighteenth century, we thus witness a point of culmination in the development of both biography and autobiography. Although the autobiographical form had up to this time been considered only a branch of biography—so much so, that it had no distinguishing name until 1809—it had nevertheless developed independently, and latterly had influenced biography much more than it had been influenced by that form. After the work of Mason and Boswell, and the promulgation of Johnson's opinion, the threads of biography and autobiography unite, that of autobiography ever predominating in the pattern, and growing ever brighter and clearer. As Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in 1791 marks the high point reached by biography in the eighteenth century, so the narratives of Hume, Franklin, and Gibbon—the latter appearing in 1799—mark the high point of autobiography. From this time forward, all biography is autobiographical in method.

<sup>1</sup> Cross, *Development of the English Novel*, p. 22.



## CHAPTER VII

## BIOGRAPHY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

“WHATEVER reason there might have been in former days to complain of the want of due respect to the memory of distinguished persons, it can hardly be said of our times that an indifference prevails in regard to departed merit. Instead of lamenting with the great Lord Bacon that ‘The writing of Lives is not more frequent,’ we could, perhaps with more propriety, wish that the practice were either limited or better directed. . . . Of late years, thanks to the officious zeal of friendship, and the active industry of literary undertakers, biographical memoirs have become as multitudinous, prolix, and veracious as epitaphs in a country churchyard.” Thus wrote John Watkins in 1821.<sup>1</sup> His words may well stand at the beginning of any discussion of biography in the nineteenth century, for in this century the writing of biography became a business. The output has been enormous, and a reader stands bewildered before the rows upon rows of biographical volumes which confront him upon library shelves. It is no longer possible for one to discuss all the works that have been published, nor, happily, is it necessary. The main line of development is obvious.

The course of English biography since the beginning of the nineteenth century has been determined by two influences: that exerted by Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, and that similar, but more powerful influence, exerted by autobiography. This statement may call for a little explanatory

<sup>1</sup> In the preface to his *Universal Biographical Dictionary*.

substantiation, as there is no doubt misunderstanding in regard to its full import. For example, Percy Fitzgerald has contended that "during the last hundred years there is not a single instance of any work that was written on Boswell's extraordinary system." "Boswell," writes Mr. Fitzgerald, "was attached to Johnson as a 'reporter' of his sayings and doings, and the bulk of his book is formed from his own private diary or journal, artistically revised and abstracted. His accounts of other persons came from the same source, viz., his private diary. In 'the new era in biography' we cannot reckon on such an exceptional combination as this."<sup>1</sup> So far, true; Mr. Fitzgerald, however, omits entirely reference to the autobiographical method adopted by Boswell—that method of employing, as a part of the narrative, Johnson's own letters, diaries, and published works. To be sure, Boswell scored an unusual success in reporting Johnson's conversation, the result of "the fortunate accident" of Johnson's being a remarkable talker and Boswell's being a remarkable reporter. We must not, for the reason that the record of conversation in Boswell's book is so rich and full, forget that such record is yet only a part of the method. As a matter of fact, and in summation of this point, it is not going too far to say that every biography of any importance since the days of Boswell's *Johnson* has employed, with necessary variations of course, the methods of that great *Life*. Even Mr. Fitzgerald's *Life of Boswell* is but a variant of the Boswell model. The direct influence of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is difficult to trace: without having ever been translated into any foreign language, this book has undoubtedly done more than any other single work of its kind to point the world to the true method of biography.

"There are few copious and profound lives of eminent

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of James Boswell*, vol. ii. p. 282, note.

men," wrote Sir Egerton Brydges in 1834, "to which the persons recorded have not by their own pens afforded a large portion of the materials. Almost all other lives are comparatively dry and barren."<sup>1</sup> What Mr. Brydges has recorded, thus early in the nineteenth century, as his own conviction, has remained permanently and increasingly true. Whenever a man has left an autobiography, that has become the basis of any attempted biography; in the absence of any such autobiographical document, there has been a turning to journals, diaries, letters, recorded conversations—to anything, in fact, which might help the biographer to follow the autobiographical method.

The Boswell-autobiographical method has its pitfalls. "Boswell, the prince of biographers," writes Sir James Stephen, "has well nigh ruined the art of biography. For like every other art, it has its laws, or rather is bound by those laws to which all composition is subject, whether the pen or the pencil, the chisel or the musical chords, be the instrument with which we work. Of those canons, the chief is, that the artist must aim at unity of effect, and must therefore bring all the subordinate parts of his design into a tributary dependence on his principal object. Boswell (a man of true genius, however coarse his feelings, and however flagrant his self-conceit) knew how to extract from every incident of his hero's life, and from the meanest alike and the noblest of his hero's associates, a series of ever-varying illustrations and embellishments of his hero's character. The imagination of Cervantes scarcely produced a portrait more single, harmonious, and prominent, in the centre of innumerable sketches, and of groups which fill without overcrowding the canvas. The imitators of this great master have aspired to the same success by the simple collocation of all facts, all letters, and all sayings, from

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, vol. i. p. 321.

which the moral, intellectual, or social nature of the main figure on their biographical easel may be inferred. But in order to truth of effect, a narrator must suppress much of the whole truth. Charles V. of Spain, and Charles I. of England, still live in picture as they lived in the flesh, because Titian and Vandyke knew how to exclude, to conceal, and to diminish, as well as how to copy. Imagination cannot do her work unless she be free in the choice of her materials, and if the work of the imagination be undone, nothing is done which any distant times will hoard as a part of their literary inheritance.”<sup>1</sup> We may well keep this paragraph in mind as we consider the biographical contribution of the years following Boswell.

The first great biography of the nineteenth century, a work which has by many critics been ranked as second only to Boswell's *Johnson*, is John Gibson Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1836-8). It is to this work that we may turn for confirmation of the influence exerted by the Boswell-autobiographical method. Lockhart informs us that he had made substantial progress in composing the biography of Scott, before an autobiographical fragment, composed by Scott in 1808, was discovered in an old cabinet at Abbotsford. "This fortunate accident," wrote Lockhart, "rendered it necessary that I should altogether remodel the work which I had commenced. The first chapter . . . consists of the Ashestiel fragment; which gives a clear outline of his early life down to the period of his call to the Bar—July 1792. All the notes appended to this chapter are also by himself. They are in a handwriting very different from the text, and seem, from various circumstances, to have been added in 1826. It appeared to me, however, that the author's modesty had prevented him from telling the story of his youth with that fulness of detail which would

<sup>1</sup> *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, vol. ii. pp. 286-7 (3rd ed.).

now satisfy the public. I have therefore recast my own collections as to the period in question, and presented the substance of them, in five succeeding chapters, as *illustrations* of his too brief autobiography. This procedure has been attended with many obvious disadvantages; but I greatly prefer it to printing the precious fragment in an appendix."<sup>1</sup> In this manner does Lockhart acknowledge the pre-eminent value of the autobiographical method. As to the method followed by Lockhart throughout the remainder of the long biography, he may again speak for himself: "I have . . . endeavoured to lay before the reader those parts of Sir Walter's character to which we have access, as they were indicated in his sayings and doings through the long series of his years—making use, whenever it was possible, of his own letters and diaries rather than of any other materials;—but refrained from obtruding almost anything of comment. It was my wish to let the character develop itself."<sup>2</sup> In other words, in the *Life of Scott* we have Boswell's method adapted to the purposes and manner of Lockhart.<sup>3</sup>

The *Life of Scott* has been freely censured and copiously praised. Leslie Stephen says that it "may safely be described as, next to Boswell's *Johnson*, the best in the language."<sup>4</sup> Professor Saintsbury refers to Boswell's work as "the only possible rival" of Lockhart's; and goes on to say that "the taste and spirit of Lockhart's book are not less admirable than the skill of its arrangement and the competency of its writing; nor would it be easily possible to find a happier adjustment in this respect in the whole

<sup>1</sup> Preface, *Life of Scott*.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Scott*, vol. vii. p. 398.

<sup>3</sup> See *Life of Scott*, vol. iv. pp. 150-1, for Lockhart's reasons for not recording Scott's familiar conversation. Lockhart undoubtedly realised that he did not possess Boswell's gift for reporting conversation.

<sup>4</sup> In *Dictionary of National Biography*, article "Lockhart."

annals of biography.”<sup>1</sup> “It is an achievement,” writes Professor Hugh Walker, “which has very rarely been rivalled.”<sup>2</sup> It is needful, in the face of such enthusiastic praise, to look somewhat on the other side. Especially is it valuable, in considering the evolution of the biographical form, to ascertain whether Lockhart has made sufficient advance over the work of Boswell to entitle him to an equality of rank.

We may best begin with one of Lockhart’s own estimates. “My sole object,” wrote Lockhart in a letter (January 1837) to Will Laidlaw, “is to do him justice, or rather to let him do himself justice, by so contriving it that he shall be, as far as possible from first to last, his own historiographer, and I have therefore willingly expended the time that would have sufficed for writing a dozen books on what will be no more than the compilation of one.”<sup>3</sup> With this estimate we may well consider what Thomas Carlyle wrote in what Mr. Lang pronounces “the only contemporary reviewal that holds its ground.”<sup>4</sup> Lockhart’s work, writes Carlyle, “is not so much a composition as what we may call a compilation well done. Neither is this a task of no difficulty; this too is a task that may be performed with extremely various degrees of merit: from the *Life and Correspondence of Hannah More*, for instance, up to this *Life of Scott*, there is a wide range indeed. . . . To picture forth the Life of Scott according to any rules of art or composition, so that a reader, on adequately examining it, might say to himself, ‘There is Scott, there is the physiognomy and meaning of Scott’s appearance and transit on this earth; such was he by nature, so did the world act on him, so he on the world, with such result and significance for

<sup>1</sup> *A History of Nineteenth Century Literature*, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> *The Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 924.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Andrew Lang’s *Life of Lockhart*, vol. ii. p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119.

himself and us:’ this was by no manner of means Mr. Lockhart’s plan. A plan which, it is rashly said, should preside over every biography!”<sup>1</sup>

Carlyle lamented, too, the great length of the biography; he reviewed it before the publication of the seventh and last volume, a fact that Mr. Lang deploras. It is doubtful, however, whether the seventh volume, which contains most certainly the best of Lockhart’s performance, would have altered Carlyle’s opinion to any great extent: he would merely have insisted that there should have been more compression—more *composition*. “The physiognomy of Scott,” thus wrote Carlyle in the aforementioned review, “will not be much altered for us by that seventh volume; the prior six have altered it but little;—as, indeed, a man who has written some two hundred volumes of his own, and lived for thirty years amid the universal speech of friends must have already left some likeness of himself. . . . And, in the *mean* while, study to think it nothing miraculous that seven biographical volumes are given where one had been better.” “Scott’s biography,” concludes Carlyle, “if uncomposed, lies printed and indestructible here, in the elementary state, and can at any time be composed, if necessary, by whosoever has a call to it.”

Now that enough time has elapsed for us to get a proper perspective, we must admit that Carlyle’s criticism is right and just: his review remains the best word on the subject. The *Life of Scott* is much too long; if “a work of thorough craft,” as we may well admit it to be, it is yet far from being a work of art.<sup>2</sup> The material lies there in “the elementary state”: a reader travels laboriously through the vast

<sup>1</sup> Review of Lockhart’s *Scott*.

<sup>2</sup> “. . . Lockhart’s merit is mainly due to the excellence and the abundance of the raw material provided for him in Scott’s ample journals and correspondence.”—Lee, *Principles of Biography*, p. 49.

tract of eighty-four chapters, and not infrequently, in the all but interminable wilderness, well-nigh loses sight of the figure of Sir Walter, or at best, sees him but dimly. There are masses of documents—letters, diaries, journals, extracts from prefaces—yet there is little selection; the reader must devour the whole feast. The biography is a mine to be worked: it contains rich stores of precious ore; the reader, however, must do much toilsome digging. It is scarcely too much to say that “the features of the man are nowhere united into a portrait, but left to the reader to unite as he may; a task which, to most readers, will be hard enough.”<sup>1</sup> One has the feeling, when reading the work, that the writing of it must have been a great effort for Lockhart: the book seems to lack spontaneity, the freedom that results from the sheer joy of writing. Lockhart’s style has been highly praised, by none more liberally than by Professor Walker. “Through the whole book Lockhart’s style is excellent. It is simple and unstrained, and wholly free from self-consciousness. There is no attempt at fine writing; the excellent consists in doing with complete success what is attempted, in expressing in the most translucent phrase the meaning intended to be conveyed. For this reason the reader seldom stops to notice how high is the quality of the English.”<sup>2</sup> A less enthusiastic critic might be inclined to say that although the style is clear, it is nevertheless rather heavy; one has a feeling that in many places more words are employed than are necessary to convey the meaning intended. Except in a few places—notably in the story of Scott’s death—Lockhart does not write more excellent English than does Boswell; we certainly cannot acknowledge him to be master of so perfect a style as that of James Anthony Froude.

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle, *Werner*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 923.



One thing Lockhart did supremely well, and in doing this he followed the general trend of biographical development, and was a worthy successor to Boswell. In this, too, he furnished a high example to all future biographers. He set himself deliberately and firmly against panegyric and dared to tell the story of Sir Walter's life—defects and all—as honestly as it was possible for him to do so. "A stern sense of duty—that kind of sense of it which is combined with the feeling of his actual presence in a serene state of elevation above all petty terrestrial and temporary views—will induce me to touch the few darker points in his life and character as freely as the others which were so predominant."<sup>1</sup> He has been sufficiently and justly praised for his course in this matter, and time has only served to fortify his position and to discredit contemporary antagonistic criticism. At this point, Carlyle's criticism again remains unimpaired. "Probably," wrote Carlyle, "it was Mr. Lockhart's feeling of what the great public would approve, that led him, open-eyed, into this offence against the small criticising public: we joyfully accept the omen. Perhaps then, of all the praises copiously bestowed on his work, there is none in reality so creditable to him as this same censure, which has also been pretty copious. It is a censure better than a good many praises. . . . For our part, we hope all manner of biographies that are written in England will henceforth be written so. If it is fit that they be written otherwise, then it is still fitter that they be not written at all: to produce not things but ghosts of things can never be the duty of man." "Not of all men is it well, perhaps," says Andrew Lang, "that biography should be written thus. Not thus unsparingly did Lockhart think it becoming to write about Robert Burns. But it is a thing to rejoice in, that the full

<sup>1</sup> Lockhart in letter to Will Laidlaw, quoted by Lang, *Life of Lockhart*, vol. ii. p. 127-8.

story of one great man's life can be told as Lockhart has told the story of Scott's life. We know the worst of Sir Walter; we have the full portrait of a man; the defects are blazoned by the intense light of genius and goodness, and, thus displayed, how slight they are, how high is that noble nature above ours, if indeed it attains not to the rare perfection of the saints! Scott, assuredly, was not a saint, but a man living in the world, and, it is granted by his biographer, living too much for the world. But he lived for other men as few of the saints have lived, and his kindness, helpfulness, courage, temper, and moral excellence, his absolute, immaculate freedom from the literary sins of envy, jealousy, vanity, shine in Lockhart's papers as an eternal, if unapproachable example. Only a good man could have so clearly observed, so affectionately adored, and so excellently recorded these virtues." <sup>1</sup>

On one other point we may take Mr. Lang's judgment, as that of a man who speaks justly in spite of his prepossessions. "Of the literary merits of the *Life of Scott* it is not possible for one whose breviary, as it were, the book has been from boyhood, to speak with impartiality. To a Scot, and a Scot of the Border, the book has the charm of home, and is dear to us as his own grey hills were dear to Sir Walter. Necessarily, inevitably, the stranger cannot, or seldom can, share this sentiment. Mr. Saintsbury, now in some degree a Scot by adoption, has, indeed, placed the book beside or above Boswell's. That is a length to which I cannot go; for Boswell's hero appears to myself to be of a character more universally human, a wiser man, a greater humourist, his biography a more valuable possession, than Sir Walter and Sir Walter's *Life*. But it were childish to dispute about the relative merits of two *chefs-d'œuvre*. Each work is perfect in its kind and in relation to its subject. The self-

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lockhart*, vol. ii. p. 121-2.

repression of Lockhart, accompanied by his total lack of self-consciousness (so astonishing in so shy a man, when his own person has to figure on the scene), is as valuable as the very opposite quality in Boswell.”<sup>1</sup>

The next noteworthy success after Lockhart's *Scott* was Arthur Penrhyn Stanley's *Life of Thomas Arnold* (1844). The work exhibits more of condensation than does that of Lockhart; on the contrary, it is less unified than the *Scott* and exhibits more evidently the traces of painful labour. Stanley admitted that the work was the most difficult in which he ever engaged. It was originally the intention of Stanley that “the several parts should have been supplied by different writers.” Fortunately, this method was abandoned: it is almost impossible to attain unity of effect unless one master-hand erects the structure; a mosaic, composed of contributions from several pens, may form a memorial volume, but hardly a biography. Stanley was scarcely successful in his handling of Arnold's letters: he separated the letters from the narrative, employing the narrative “to state as much as would enable the reader to enter upon the letters with a correct understanding of their writer in his different periods of life, and his different spheres of action.” According to this plan the letters are given in collections at the end of chapters. “Such a plan,” says Professor Walker, “is really a confession of failure . . . the work of weaving the letters into the narrative, which ought to have been performed by the biographer, is left to the imagination of the reader.”<sup>2</sup> Stanley did well, on the other hand, not to sit in judgment on Arnold: “The only question which I have allowed myself to ask in each particular act or opinion that has come before me,” he writes in the Preface, “has been not whether I approved or

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lockhart*, vol. ii. p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 925.

disapproved, but whether it was characteristic of him." Without being a remarkable type of the autobiographical method, the *Life of Arnold*, by reason of its sanity, its clear English, its sympathetic delineation arising from Stanley's love of Arnold, is sure of its place in the history of nineteenth-century biography.

The century was well-nigh closed when James Anthony Froude produced the *Life of Thomas Carlyle*, a work which, for skilful selection and rejection, effects of light and shade, remarkable unity, and brilliance of style—in short, for sheer artistry, is unsurpassed; and, from a dispassionate point of view, marks the highest summit reached by English biography since the great work of Boswell. Froude's *Carlyle* has been, ever since its publication (1882-4), a famous battle-ground. The storm raised by Lockhart's *Life of Scott* was but a summer breeze in comparison. It might almost be said that Froude was permitted to enjoy no peace of mind after the biography was given to the public. It is certain that he has been grossly misjudged, severely maligned, unjustly condemned. Matter has been published concerning both him and Carlyle that had much better been left unpublished. Not even yet has the storm subsided; but it is subsiding, and when the time of clear shining comes, Froude will get his due, and the *Life of Carlyle* will be allowed without protest to take its place where already even unfriendly critics have reluctantly conceded it to belong—in the very forefront of English biography. This is not the place to plead the cause of Froude; but no discussion of the *Life of Carlyle*, from whatever angle, can proceed without something of adequate adjustment of values arising from a careful view of both sides of the case.

First, we may proceed to an examination of the method followed by Froude and the consequent place of the bio-

graphy in the evolution of the form. Theoretically, Froude adopted the method used by Boswell and Lockhart. "So far [until 1860]," writes Froude, "my account of Carlyle has been taken from written memorials, letters, diaries, and autobiographical fragments. For the future the story will form itself round my own personal intercourse with him."<sup>1</sup> We recognise, at once, that this plan is the exact parallel of that employed in Boswell's *Johnson*. Froude, then, cannot be said to have advanced the evolution of the biographical form; he worked according to the old and tried method. He does not obtrude himself unduly upon the scene of action; Leslie Stephen commends him for "the skill with which he makes the story tell itself, and develops the drama without obtruding himself as showman."<sup>2</sup> He does not report Carlyle's conversation in the manner of Boswell, although he had abundant opportunity to do so. While he wrote a fairly full narrative, he stopped short of the tiresome prolixity of Lockhart. In short, while his *Carlyle* marks no advance in method, it does mark a distinct advance in manner—and that manner is the very essence of Froude's literary faith and theory, the source at once of his strength and of his weakness.

It can scarcely be denied that Froude possessed the dramatic instinct to a high degree; history was to him nothing if not dramatic, and few men have excelled him in its dramatic representation. In this respect, he was like Carlyle, of whom, in truth, he was an ardent disciple. Now, the dramatic instinct is prone to display itself unduly: in the attempt to portray a striking situation there is great danger of over-emphasis; Carlyle has frequently been charged with such exaggeration. Somewhat similarly, Macaulay has been charged with warping the facts to

<sup>1</sup> *Life in London*, vol. ii. p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. iii. p. 224.

enable him to make a picturesque phrase. But this dramatic instinct—this sure attribute of the artist—is of all other gifts essential to the great biographer. Boswell possessed it in a high degree; Lockhart did not have it, hence the lesser quality of his success; perhaps the absence of it among biographers accounts for the scarcity of great biographies. One of the best critical discussions of biography in the English language was written by William Ewart Gladstone in his review of Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*.<sup>1</sup> "A peculiar faculty," wrote Mr. Gladstone, "and one approaching to the dramatic order, belongs to the successful painter of historical portraits and belongs also to the true biographer. It is that of representing personality. In the picture, what we want is not merely a collection of unexceptionable lines and colours so presented as readily to identify their original. Such a work is not the man, but a duly attested certificate of the man. What we require, however, is the man and not merely the certificate. In the same way, what we want in a biography, and what, despite the etymology of the title, we very seldom find, is *life*. The very best transcript is a failure, if it be a transcript only. To fulfil its idea, it must have in it the essential quality of movement; must realise the lofty fiction of the divine Shield of Achilles, where the upturning earth, though wrought in metal, darkened as the plough went on, and the figures of the battle-piece dealt their strokes and parried them, and dragged out from the turmoil the bodies of their dead. . . . But neither love, which is indeed a danger as well as an ally . . . nor forgetfulness of self, will make a thoroughly good biography, without this subtle gift of imparting life. By this it was that Boswell established himself as the prince of all biographers." To him who attains unto such "lofty fiction," much may be forgiven. And

<sup>1</sup> *Quarterly Review*, vol. 142, pp. 1-50.

Froude has attained. To one who reads with open, unprejudiced mind, the story of Carlyle's life unrolls itself with a power not unlike that of the greatest Greek dramas. We see, before our very eyes, the pilgrimage of Carlyle from birth to death; we see his Titanic struggle with life; we see him go down into the darkening shadows. One feels oneself growing old with the hero, as one proceeds to the end of the volumes.

This compelling power of Froude's work made itself felt from the very first. "It would be an ill compliment to Mr. Froude," wrote Mowbray Morris in the *Quarterly Review*,<sup>1</sup> "to suppose him hurt by the hard words that have been flung at the great mausoleum he has now completed to the memory of Carlyle. For great it assuredly is, nor in substance only. Whatever be our feelings for the relics it is intended to enshrine, whatever even we may think of the style of the building, we must all respect the pious care and industry of the architect. Our language is not rich in biographies of this high class. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, Stanley's *Life of Arnold*, Mr. Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*; it would have been hard to name another till these four volumes appeared, but in that list they will assuredly take their place." "It seems hard to doubt the truth of the portrait," says the reviewer in closing. "The man that many, perhaps, who never set eyes on him in the flesh have fashioned out of his works, it may not be; but that this is the true and theirs the counterfeit likeness, is surely writ large on every page, and with the man's own hand."

The chief outcry against Froude was the self-same outcry that was raised against Lockhart: matters were revealed that should not have been revealed. "He is found

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 159, pp. 76-112.

guilty of having said this and that, calculated not to be entirely pleasant to this man and that; in other words, calculated to give him and the thing he worked in a living set of features, not leave him vague, in the white beatified-ghost condition," to adopt Carlyle's own words. No minute discussion of this point can here be entered into; can any one, however, who has read with thoughtful care Carlyle's review of Lockhart's *Scott*, taking the matter therein at its plain, face value, and in connexion with Carlyle's other utterances, both spoken and written, on the subject of biography, doubt that Froude followed the very method and manner which Carlyle would have approved? "Express biography of himself he would really rather there should be none" [but note that he does not *prohibit* one]; but such a work once taken in hand, are we not sure that Carlyle himself would have courted the most unsparingly frank delineation? In the opinion of Froude's biographer he would: "Froude was only following the principles laid down by Carlyle himself. In reviewing Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Carlyle emptied the vials of his scorn, which were ample and capacious, upon 'English biography, bless its mealy mouth.' The censure of Lockhart, for 'personalities, indiscretion,' 'violating the sanctities of private life,' was, he said, better than a good many praises. A biographer should speak the truth, having the fear of God before his eyes, and no other fear whatever. That Lockhart had done, and in the eyes of Carlyle, who admired him as he admired few men, it was a supreme merit."<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, Froude

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Paul, *Life of Froude*, pp. 313-14. Read also the pages immediately following. Mr. Froude spoke thus for himself: "The biographies of the great men of the past, the great spiritual teachers especially, with whom Carlyle must be ranked, are generally useless. They are idle and incredible panegyrics, with the features drawn without shadows, false, conventional, and worthless. The only 'Life' of a man which is not worse than useless is a 'Life' which tells all the truth so far as the biographer knows it. He may



erred not so much in what he published, for which, indeed, he has been thoroughly castigated, as in what he did not publish. In his desire to pass lightly over certain matters, he without doubt left them dark, told them in a way that left room for wrong inferences. Had he expressed fully and clearly, so far as he knew the truth, matters which he later gave in the posthumous pamphlet, *My Relations with Carlyle*, his method would have been less vulnerable. Nothing is ever gained by giving just enough to whet curiosity, and then leaving the matter dark.

It was not from any desire to do injustice to Carlyle that Froude abstained from reporting his conversation. He had thought the matter over carefully, and had come to much the same conclusion as had Lockhart before him. "To report correctly the language of conversations, especially when extended over a wide period, is almost an impossibility. The listener, in spite of himself, adds something of his own in colour, form, or substance."<sup>1</sup> Froude no doubt realised that he did not possess the gift of reporting conversation; even Boswell, as we know, "Johnsonised" his notes of the Doctor's talk.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Carlyle's talk was so much like his writing that it was not necessary for Froude to give

be mistaken, but he has at least been faithful, and his mistakes may be corrected. So perhaps may some of mine, especially if particular papers have been purposely withheld from me."—*My Relations with Carlyle*, p. 40.

<sup>1</sup> *Carlyle's Life in London*, vol. ii. p. 443. J. W. Cross reached the same conclusion, as he tells us in the Preface to the *Life of George Eliot*: "I have refrained almost entirely from quoting remembered sayings of George Eliot, because it is difficult to be certain of complete accuracy, and everything depends upon accuracy. Recollections of conversation are seldom to be implicitly trusted in the absence of notes made at the time. The value of spoken words depends, too, so much on the *tone*, and on the circumstances which gave rise to their utterance, that they often mislead as much as they enlighten when, in the process of repetition, they have taken colour from another mind. 'All interpretations depend upon the interpreter.'"

<sup>2</sup> See chap. vii. of Fitzgerald's *Boswell's Autobiography*.

much of it. "I heard him flinging off the matter intended for the rest of the series [of *Latter Day Pamphlets*] which had been left unwritten," records Froude, "pouring out, for hours together, a torrent of sulphurous denunciation. No one could check him. If any one tried contradiction, the cataract arose against the obstacle till it rushed over it and drowned it. But, in general, his listeners sat silent. The imagery, his wild play of humour, the immense knowledge always evident in the grotesque forms which it assumed, were in themselves so dazzling and so entertaining that we lost the use of our own faculties till it was over."<sup>1</sup> Who that is acquainted with Carlyle's writings could fail to recognise "the imagery, the wild play of humour, the grotesque forms" here mentioned? And when Carlyle himself has written them all out largely and unstintedly, Froude may well be excused from attempting to report, lamely, what was no doubt practically impossible to report accurately.

The deliberate errors which have been charged upon Mr. Froude have a remarkable way of disappearing under careful scrutiny. Mr. David Wilson's "multiply the number of errors found in vol. i. p. 5, by the total number of pages, 1860, and then consider seriously what such a book is worth,"<sup>2</sup> is more misleading, even as hyperbole, than anything which Froude has written. Even the "gey ill to deal with," of which so much has been made, is found in the *Life* in its correct form.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if Carlyle was "gey ill to deal with," as is conceded, there cannot be any doubt that he was also at times (not always, to be sure—nobody says so much) "gey ill to live with." Leslie Stephen, a careful student of the matter, and a critic not inclined to be too lenient towards him, exonerates Froude

<sup>1</sup> *Life in London*, vol. ii. p. 41.   <sup>2</sup> *Mr. Froude and Carlyle*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> *Life in London*, vol. ii. p. 91.

from wilful error: "I have heard Froude accused of . . . a malicious misrepresentation of the man whom he chose as his prophet. I believe such a view to be entirely mistaken."<sup>1</sup> An interesting example of the manner in which Froude has been misrepresented is found in the Introduction to *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (p. xx) where Sir James Crichton-Browne says: "It is characteristic of the looseness of Froude's methods that he states in the 'Life in London' (vol. ii. p. 408) that the manuscript of the 'Letters and Memorials' was placed in his hands in June 1871, whereas Carlyle, in February 1873, speaks of it in his will as being still in his possession; and, indeed, a number of his notes to it actually bear date in that year." Reference to Froude's own statements quickly clear the matter up. Froude distinctly states (p. 412) that, after receiving the manuscript in June 1871, he sent it to John Forster, and (p. 414) that, at the close of 1873, "again without note or warning, he [Carlyle] sent me his own and his wife's private papers, journals, correspondence, reminiscences, etc."

"I cannot recognise the Carlyle of Mr. Froude in the nine volumes as the real and total Carlyle I myself knew," complains Professor David Masson.<sup>2</sup> Most assuredly may Professor Masson thus complain! Had he written a *Life of Carlyle*, it would have been Masson's Carlyle that was delineated, and Froude could, with as much justification, complain that in it he could not recognise the real and total Carlyle whom he himself knew. Froude's work need not

<sup>1</sup> *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. iii. p. 221. Cf. Stephen's letter to Charles Eliot Norton: "Still, I do fancy that I understand Froude a little better than before. He was terribly put about by the responsibility, and did, I believe, try to speak the truth, though he may have been misled by his love of the graphic."—Quoted in Frederic Maitland's *Life of Stephen*, p. 483. See also Stephen's article on Carlyle in *Dictionary of National Biography*, and the essays on "Carlyle's Ethics" and "Froude" in vol. iii. *Studies of a Biographer*.

<sup>2</sup> *Carlyle Personally and in his Writings*, pp. 10-11.

for this reason be depreciated. A biography represents the biographer's conception of the subject, just as a portrait represents what the artist has seen in his subject. We all recognise that a portrait is not all of the man, nor yet just the man we knew: the spirit of life is lacking, just as surely as something we saw in the man, which the artist did not see, is lacking. Just so a biography cannot be the living man that every one of his friends knew. Stanley complained of this fact in his Preface to the *Life of Arnold*, where he speaks of those "who will painfully feel the contrast which probably always exists in the case of any remarkable man, between the image of his inner life, as it was known to those nearest and dearest to him, and the outward image of a written biography, which can rarely be more than a faint shadow of what they cherish in their own recollections—the one representing what he was—the other only what he thought and did; the one formed in the atmosphere which he had himself created—the other necessarily accommodating itself to the public opinion to which it is mainly addressed." The testimony of contemporaries of Charles Kingsley does not leave one with the same conception of Mr. Kingsley as one gains from reading the *Life* by Mrs. Kingsley, yet she insists, "we speak that we do know, and testify to that we have seen."<sup>1</sup> It is eternally true that a man is *persona*: he assumes different masks when observed by different people—masks produced, perhaps, by something in the vision of those who do the observing. This truth should always be kept in mind, in judging any biography. "I must take the story," writes Leslie Stephen of Froude's *Carlyle*, "not as definitive truth, but as an aspect of the truth seen from a particular point of view."<sup>2</sup> Nothing more just or more discriminating

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Letters of Charles Kingsley*, vol. ii. p. 477.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. iii. p. 223.

has ever been written by way of criticism on a great biography.

In the main features, Froude has given us the true Thomas Carlyle. Of this there is ample testimony. "By nobody," writes Mr. W. G. Collingwood, "more than by Mr. Ruskin was Carlyle's reputation valued, and yet he acknowledged that Mr. Froude was but telling the truth in the revelations which so surprised the public, and much as he admired Mr. Norton, he deprecated the attack on Carlyle's literary executor, whose motives he understood and approved."<sup>1</sup> Professor Masson, too, has given somewhat reluctant testimony to the general value of Froude's work in the complete series of Carlyle books: "Nor must we forget the prodigious interest and impressiveness, all in all, of those nine volumes, or the fact that they themselves contain, whether in the autobiographical letters and extracts or in Mr. Froude's own comments and narrative, so much indirect contradiction and rebuke of the paltry misjudgment of Carlyle which many of the readers of the volumes have carried away from them that the persistence of such readers in their misjudgment can be accounted for only by the radical smallness of the average mind, its inability to grasp or appreciate anything very uncommon."<sup>2</sup> To Horace Traubel, Walt Whitman expressed his opinion thus: "The books do not have such a black influence over me—are on the contrary inspiring—put some rich blood into my poor veins. The Carlyle—Froude's Carlyle—is its own excuse for being: I do not sympathise with the howl against it. What justifies it to me is the fact that this is Carlyle—that and nothing else: just Carlyle: not a picture of what he should have been, but of what he was: my simple criticism of Froude's life would be, that it gives the

<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Work of John Ruskin*, vol. ii. p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> *Carlyle Personally and in his Writings*, pp. 9-10.

man as he was, growl and all.”<sup>1</sup> It is needless to quote other such testimony. What those need to do who are inclined to judge Froude by the statements of his enemies is to read with close scrutiny the *Life of Carlyle*, and then compare “chapter and verse” with the criticisms. The exercise will prove wholesome. The hopelessness of setting aside the *Life of Carlyle* is clearly evident to any careful student. “Of all Froude’s books,” writes P. Hume Brown, “it is doubtless the one which will preserve his name the longest; the eminence and distinctiveness of its subject and the skill of the biographer combine to make it a representative book of an epoch, and as such it has its only companion in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*.”<sup>2</sup>

Trevelyan tells us that Macaulay’s was “one of the happiest lives that it has ever fallen to the lot of a biographer to record.”<sup>3</sup> How very different from the task that Froude had in hand: if Macaulay’s was one of the happiest lives, Carlyle’s was one of the unhappiest, most heavy-laden. The tasks of Trevelyan and of Froude are hardly comparable. Set over against the portraits of Carlyle by Watts and Millais and Whistler, the truth of the picture limned by Froude is not impeached. Froude may have painted after the manner of Titian and Vandyke, yet what he has produced is high art: what he perceived, that he has drawn imperishably. “Working with consummate skill upon magnificent materials, Froude has constructed a character and has left a picture of life-enthraling interest. If his Carlyle be one of the most misleading of biographies, it is also one of the most fascinating, and should it ever be superseded and consigned to the literary lumber-room, English readers will be the poorer by the loss of one of the most readable books in the language. In sheer literary

<sup>1</sup> *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. ii, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> In *Chambers’s Encyclopædia of English Literature*, vol. iii, p. 503.

<sup>3</sup> *Life of Macaulay*, vol. ii, p. 468.

skill even Froude never surpassed it.”<sup>1</sup> There is no sign that Froude’s work is in danger of being set aside. “Froude had so much confidence in the essential greatness of the man,” writes Mr. Herbert Paul, “that he did not hesitate to show him as he was, not a prodigy of impossible perfection, but a sterling character and a lofty genius. Therefore his portrait lives, and will live, when biographies written for flattery or for edification have been consigned to boxes or to lumber-rooms.”<sup>2</sup>

At the very close of the century (1900) appeared Alexander V. G. Allen’s *Life of Phillips Brooks*, a work worthy to be named among the greatest of English biographies. Beyond doubt it marks the highest point attained by an American biographer. Mr. Allen has worked along the familiar Boswell-autobiographical method. There is not a large amount of conversation recorded, but the extracts from letters, diaries, notebooks, and newspapers are copious, strictly relevant, and chosen with rare discrimination. Although the *Life of Brooks* marks no advance in method of biography, it does stand as a remarkable culmination and fulfilment of the theory which Boswell did so much to put into practice. After reading Mr. Allen’s work one feels able in regard to Phillips Brooks to formulate answers to the questions suggested by Carlyle: “How did the world and man’s life, from his particular position, represent themselves to his mind? How did co-existing circumstances modify him from without; how did he modify these from within? With what endeavours and what efficacy rule over them; with what resistance and what suffering sink

<sup>1</sup> *Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 875. While I am far from agreeing with all that Professor Walker has written of Froude and of Carlyle in this admirable volume, I am glad to say that I consider his estimates surprisingly just. They seem to me an evidence of the new light in which Froude may yet be held.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Froude*, p. 313.

under them? In one word, what and how produced was the effect of society on him; what and how produced was his effect on society?" Carlyle's further statement forms sufficient commentary upon the *Life of Brooks*: "He who should answer these questions, in regard to any individual, would, as we believe, furnish a model of perfection in biography."<sup>1</sup>

The century produced few other biographies worthy to be mentioned along with the great models which we have just considered. Beyond Southey's *Life of Nelson*, Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*, all other biographies seem on a lower plane. John Forster's *Life of Dickens*, Mrs. Kingsley's *Life and Letters of Charles Kingsley*, and Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir of Alfred Tennyson*, without marking any advance in the evolution of the form, perhaps follow the greater works at the least distance. Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, which will be considered later, is in a class by itself.

The master biographies appear the greater when contrasted with the works of those who have found the Boswell-autobiographical method a snare. Of the latter we need mention only William Hayley's *Life of Cowper*, William Roberts' *Life of Hannah More*, Thomas Moore's *Life of Byron*, and J. W. Cross' *Life of George Eliot*. All four of these biographers made the attempt to allow the letters and other autobiographical material to tell the life-story of the subject; all of them, in one way or another, failed to attain great success. Mr. Hayley not only made poor use of Cowper's letters, he also succumbed to the temptation of lavish panegyric. "We might imagine," wrote Robert Southey in the *Annual Review*, "that, when he sat down to compose, he had provided himself with a list of all the laudatory and ornamental epithets in the

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on Burns.*



English language, on which he rang his changes in conjunction with every name that occurred. It would not be easy to find a single person mentioned without some panegyric addition; and this perpetual strain of compliment throws a finical and artificial air over his language, totally repugnant to the tone of manly sincerity.”<sup>1</sup> Cowper was one of the best letter-writers that England has produced; a fact which makes Hayley’s failure all the more lamentable. “Further”—we quote again from Southey’s review—“the thread of narrative is broken, and all due proportion of length to importance of matter destroyed by such an intermixture [of letters and narrative as made by Hayley]. On the whole, we cannot consider it as a just model of this species of composition. . . . That the familiar letters of men of eminence are of themselves highly pleasing, no one will call in question; or that they form excellent matter for the use of the biographer who may, with great advantage, introduce portions of them, as illustrations of character and incident. It is only to this chequered mode of mingling them entire, with the staple of the writer’s narration, that we venture to propose our objections.” William Roberts complained that he found “difficulty in reducing his materials within the compass” of the four volumes forming the *Life of Hannah More*—a statement in itself an admission of inability to distinguish values. Moreover, Miss More’s letters are connected by the slenderest thread of dateless narrative.

Considering the greatness of the opportunities which the subject offered to him, it is hardly too much to say that Moore’s failure with the *Life of Byron* is perhaps the most conspicuous of the century. Never had a biographer greater opportunities: a storm-tossed life full of passion and adventure, letters among the best in the English language, acquaintance of long standing—all these advantages were

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 457-62 (1803).

Moore's. He seemed to realise his own inability to cope with the task: he professed to give only *The Letters and Journals of Lord Byron with Notices of his Life*. As a matter of fact, Moore was not equal to the work: the stormy spirit of Byron—a Satan in revolt—was too great, too intractable for the biographer to compass. Moore was not a biographical artist. In the two heavy folio volumes of the *Life*, Byron lies buried under a mass of material. Moore is discursive, in addition; he adds notes on every possible subject; he uses no selection and rejection. Even the style of the biography is poor. One realises the force of Carlyle's criticism: "A mass of materials is collected, and the building proceeds apace. Stone is laid on the top of stone, just as it comes to hand; a trowel or two of biographic mortar, if perfectly convenient, being spread in here and there, by way of cement; and so the strangest pile suddenly arises, amorphous, pointing every way but to the zenith, here a block of granite, there a mass of pipe-clay; till the whole finishes, when the materials are finished;—and you leave it standing to posterity, like some miniature Stonehenge, a perfect architectural enigma." <sup>1</sup> After reading the *Life of Byron*, the reader realises, too, that he has a right to demand of the biographer an interpretation—an artistic production; that he should not be left to sit down before an undigested mass. "If only good material and literary capacity had been needed, Moore's *Byron* ought to have been great." <sup>2</sup> One can appreciate the triumph of Froude after tasting the failure of Moore.

Mr. Cross' failure was due, perhaps, to his carrying the autobiographical method too far. "With the materials in my hands," he writes in the Preface, "I have endeavoured to form an *autobiography* (if the term may be permitted) of George Eliot. The life has been allowed to write itself

<sup>1</sup> *Werner*.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, *Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 924.

in extracts from her letters and journals. Free from the intrusion of any mind but her own, this method serves, I think, better than any other open to me, to show the development of her talent and character. . . . Excepting a slight introductory sketch of the girlhood, up to the time when letters became available, and a few words here and there to elucidate the correspondence, I have confined myself to the work of selection and arrangement." Not thus, however, are great lives written: interpretation is wanting; the public demands a portrait. "The biography of George Eliot as here given is a gigantic silhouette, showing how her figure rose against a dull background. Background and figure are alike dull. . . . The figure is large and imposing, but it is lifeless."<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps better to err in over-emphasising lights and shadows than to make both "background and figure alike dull." "By keeping himself so much out of sight," suggests the Rev. Thomas Davidson of Mr. Cross, "the writer only avoided Scylla to fall into Charybdis, and succeeded in making a book dull and lifeless that should have been unusually full of interest."<sup>2</sup> A biography only becomes "full of interest" as it assumes artistic form under the interpreting touch of the biographer. Mr. Cross had done better, perhaps—at least as well—if he had merely published George Eliot's correspondence and journals. Great biography, in the opinion of the nineteenth century, is not attained after Mr. Cross' plan.

The nineteenth century produced at least one who may be called a professional biographer; "no one else," at any rate, "made biography so much his business" as did John Forster, the great and influential editor of *The Examiner*. Forster was fond of history, and, like Carlyle, to him history crystallised into biography. He began his biographical

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 161, pp. 514-53.

<sup>2</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, article "Biography."

labours as editor of the *Lives of Eminent British Statesmen* (1837-39), to which he contributed a number of the Lives, afterwards (1864) expanding one of his contributions into the elaborate and important *Sir John Eliot, A Biography*. From these historical studies, it was a natural step into the field of literary biography, and here Forster wrought largely. His work consists of the *Life and Adventures* [later the *Life and Times*] of *Oliver Goldsmith* (1848), the *Life of Walter Savage Landor* (1869), the *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74), and the unfinished *Life of Jonathan Swift* (1875). In none of these biographies did Forster achieve the highest success: all of them are diligently, laboriously, and well wrought, good works of craft, lacking however the hall-mark of artistic genius, the dramatic instinct, "the touch which imparts life." His *Landor* and *Dickens* must remain authoritative, the mines from which all later biographers of these men must dig; for Forster was a personal friend of both and had access to materials no longer available. He was Landor's literary executor and Dickens' most intimate friend. It can hardly be said that a reader turns to any of these biographies for the sheer pleasure of reading—unless, perchance, it be to the *Goldsmith*; one soon gets the impression that these are works to be consulted rather than read. The example of Forster leads one to the conclusion that great biographies are not to be produced simply by turning to the business of writing them; as in the case of poets, biographers seem to be born rather than made.

A noteworthy feature of this century was what may be termed the habit of reconstructing a biography; that is, the gathering together of all available historical documents, facts, and traditions relative to some person and from these distilling something like the true story of this person's pilgrimage through life. The habit began on a large scale

—not very auspiciously it may be remarked—with William Godwin's *Life of Chaucer* (1803). This work has been sufficiently ridiculed by Robert Southey, Walter Scott, and Professor Lounsbury. Scott rightly complains that Godwin's researches into the records have produced only "one or two writs addressed to Chaucer while clerk of the works; the several grants and passports granted to him by Edward III. and Richard II. which had been referred to by former biographers; together with the poet's evidence in a court of chivalry, a contract about a house, and a solitary receipt for half a year's salary. These, with a few documents referring to John of Gaunt, make the appendix to the book, and are the only original materials brought to light by the labours of the author."<sup>1</sup> And yet, cries Scott, "behold two voluminous quartos!" "It is," writes Professor Lounsbury, "perhaps the earliest, though unhappily not the latest or even the largest, illustration of that species of biography in which the lack of information about the man who is the alleged subject is counterbalanced by long disquisitions about anything or everything he shared in or saw, or may have shared in or seen. . . . Godwin's life of the poet may indeed be declared to deserve the distinction of being the most worthless piece of biography in the English language—certainly the most worthless produced by a man of real ability."<sup>2</sup> Robert Southey expressed the wish that the plan on which Godwin attempted to write the *Life of Chaucer* might "remain for ever unique."<sup>3</sup>

The work of such reconstruction—in spite of Godwin's conspicuous failure—has gone steadily forward from Scott's

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, Jan. 1804. Scott wrote in a letter to George Ellis (March 19, 1804), ". . . nor have I either inclination or talents to use the critical scalping knife unless, as in the case of Godwin, where flesh and blood succumbed under the temptation."—Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, vol. i. p. 414.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies in Chaucer*, vol. i. pp. 192-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Review*, vol. ii. p. 456.

*Dryden* (1808) to Sidney Lee's *Shakespeare* (1898). Really valuable work has been done and a certain success attained by David Masson, whose *Life of Milton and History of his Time* (1859-1880) and *Drummond of Hawthornden* will long remain as monuments of painstaking scholarship; by James Spedding in his *Life of Bacon* (1861); by Professor Thomas Lounsbury in his *Studies in Chaucer* (1892); and by George A. Aitken in his *Life of Richard Steele* (1889), which may be recognised as "the fullest and most trustworthy existing contribution towards the life and achievements of a distinguished man of letters who died more than a hundred and eighty years ago."<sup>1</sup>

This work of reconstructing biographies has been greatly aided by the collection and publication of all available material—which collection and publication it has indeed stimulated and fostered. Diaries such as those of Pepys and Evelyn; Journals as of Wesley, Fox, and Scott; volumes of Correspondence without number; such editions as those put forth by Andrew Clark of *John Aubrey's 'Brief Lives'* and of the *Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, together with the publications of such associations as the Chaucer Society, are making the work of the redivial biographer easier.

The scientific spirit which entered into historical writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century has dominated the writing of such biographical reconstruction as has just been discussed. Biography, as a form of history, has felt the effect of "the machinery of research," and can never again be the unauthentic, half-traditional thing it was before.<sup>2</sup> In the cases of all those whose lives have not been

<sup>1</sup> Austin Dobson, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, "The Latest Life of Steele," Dent's "Wayfarer's Library."

<sup>2</sup> "In the nineteenth century the science of history underwent a sort of industrial revolution. The machinery of research, invented by the genius of men like Mabillon, was perfected and set going in all

produced by contemporaries, or by those closely contemporary, biography has followed the direction of modern scientific research; in the case of contemporary work, it follows the carefully arranged autobiographical method, which in turn is dominated by scientific accuracy.

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was a definite turning of English biography to foreign countries for subject matter. The impetus to this wider outlook was given chiefly by Thomas Carlyle, "the really efficient intermediary between the mind of Germany and that of England." Carlyle, with his enthusiasm for Goethe, and with his essays on German literature, aided by the rising influence of Berthold George Niebuhr's historical writings, paved the way for German biography written in English. We are not surprised, therefore, to find that it was to Germany that English biographers first began to turn, to an appreciable extent, for subjects. The list of such biographies is not inconsiderable; and, in the main, where both have written of the same man, the work done by British, has scarcely been excelled even by German, biographers. George Henry Lewes began his *Life of Goethe* at a time when no German author had undertaken the task; in fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the spur given by this endeavour of Lewes proved the stimulus for the beginning, by the Germans themselves, of modern German biography. It is significant that Lewes dedicated his work to Thomas Carlyle, as to one "who first taught England to appreciate Goethe." It was not, perhaps, until the appearance of Dr. Albert Bielschowsky's *Life of Goethe* (1895) that the

the archives of Europe. Isolated workers or groups of workers grew into national or international associations, producing from archives vast collections of material to be worked up into the artistic form of history. The result of this movement has been to revolutionise the whole subject."—James Thomson Shotwell, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, article "History."

Germans produced a biography of their great poet worthy to take its place with that by Lewes. In 1882, J. H. W. Stuckenberg published the first English biography of Immanuel Kant, likewise at a time when even in Germany little attention had been given to the life of the philosopher, and when German biographies of him were far from satisfactory. To the department of German biographical history Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* (1858-65) and John Robert Seeley's *Life and Times of Stein* (1878) remain as monumental contributions. "Surely," writes Professor Walker, "no higher compliment was ever paid to a historian than that which is implied in the German belief that, down to the opening of the German archives, and the publication of the correspondence of Frederick in the eighties, Carlyle's work was the best, not only as a general history of Frederick, but as a study of his campaigns."<sup>1</sup> In a lesser way, William Stigand's *Heine* (1875) and James Simes' *Lessing* (1877) demonstrate the competence of the English biographer in the province of German literature. Many German biographical works were meanwhile translated into English, such as the *Life and Letters of Niebuhr*,<sup>2</sup> the *Life of Schleiermacher*,<sup>3</sup> and Heinrich Düntzer's *Schiller and Goethe*. Before the end of the century English biographers had become thoroughly international. Henry Morley with his fascinating *Life of Jerome Cardan* (1854); John Morley with his *Rousseau* (1873), the first full biographical account of the French philosopher in English, published when "even France had nothing more complete than Musset-Pathay's *Histoire de la Vie et des Ouvrages de J. J. Rousseau* (1821)"; and John Addington Symond's *Life of Michaelangelo Buonarroti* (1893), based on studies in the archives

<sup>1</sup> *Literature of the Victorian Era*, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Edited and translated by Susanna Winkworth.

<sup>3</sup> As unfolded in his *Autobiography and Letters*, translated by Frederica Rowan.



of the Buonarroti family at Florence, have helped to uphold the traditions of English biography abroad.

So strong is the personal element in a publishing company or a magazine that a record of its life necessarily assumes the form, not so much of history as of biography. Two of the oldest publishing houses of Britain have been thus biographically chronicled. The first to turn seriously to such narrative was Samuel Smiles, who, after John Forster, came nearest to being a professional biographer, though on a lower plane. In 1891 he completed his *John Murray*, the full title of which reveals the scope of the work attempted.<sup>1</sup> It was the intention of Smiles to give a "full picture of the literature and principal men of letters of the first half of the present [nineteenth] century"; and not alone this, for by "going still farther back—to the life and correspondence of the late Mr. Murray's father—[to] include, to a certain extent, the literature of the times of Dr. Johnson, Dr. Langhorne, Dr. Cartwright, and others." In 1897 Margaret Oliphant followed with *William Blackwood and his Sons*, only two volumes of which she lived to complete. Mrs. Oliphant's work excels in the delineation of character—most of her portraits, even to the slight sketches, are well done—but it lacks something of the concentration and coherence of Smiles'. America, likewise, has produced two literary histories on this same biographical principle. Benjamin Blake Minor in his *The Southern Literary Messenger* summarises the history of this aspiring but ill-fated magazine, and incidentally somewhat of the story of many of the authors who became well known in the annals of nineteenth-century American literature; for this magazine, it may be noted, during its comparatively brief and troubled career, introduced many of these authors to

<sup>1</sup> *A Publisher and his Friends. Memoir and Correspondence of the late John Murray, with an account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768-1843.*

the reading public. It is to be regretted that Mr. Minor did not develop more fully the work to which he set his hand. Much more elaborate in both design and execution—in fact, one of the best contributions to this class of biographical literature—is J. Rainey Harper's *The House of Harper*.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Harper's volume contains excellent reminiscences of both American and English authors, and thus binds together the course of English literature in the Old World and the New.

Although during the nineteenth century the distinction between history and biography was clearly recognised, nevertheless, in many biographical works, there was a close commingling of the two. In some instances, this commingling was the deliberate intention of the writer; in others, the almost necessary result of the subject chosen for biographical treatment. For example, although David Masson indicated on the title page of his *Life of John Milton* that he intended the work to be more than a *Life*,<sup>2</sup> he felt it necessary to repeat in the Preface that he meant it to be not merely a biography of Milton, "but also, in some sort, a continuous history of his time." Those critics, therefore, who have criticised the work from the point of view of pure biography, and who have maintained that Professor Masson has buried Milton "under a load of digressive dissertations," are misjudging him: he at least did what he started out to do. Carlyle, in his *Oliver Cromwell* and *Frederick the Great*, found that he could scarcely do otherwise than go beyond the mere personal narrative; the lives of his subjects, he

<sup>1</sup> Although *The House of Harper* was published in 1912, it has been thought best to mention it here.

<sup>2</sup> *The Life of John Milton: narrated in connexion with the political, ecclesiastical, and literary history of his Time*. Carlyle spoke of "David Masson, sincere and sure of purpose; very brave, for he has undertaken to write a history of the universe from 1608 to 1674, calling it a '*Life of John Milton*.'"—Quoted by Campbell Fraser in *Biographia Philosophica*, p. 246.

perceived, were inextricably bound up with the history of the times. Not alone biography, then, nor yet simply history, but history presented biographically, these two works fulfil the purpose Carlyle had in mind. "It was an enormous undertaking," says Froude of the *Frederick*, "nothing less than the entire history, secular and spiritual, of the eighteenth century."<sup>1</sup> To attain success in such an undertaking was no small matter, and yet success Carlyle attained. "The book [Frederick]," continues Froude, "contained, if nothing else, a gallery of historical figures executed with a skill which placed Carlyle at the head of literary portrait painters."<sup>2</sup> After reading the work, Professor Barrett Wendell commented thus enthusiastically: "Such a mass of living facts—for somehow Carlyle never lets a fact lack life—I had never seen flung together before; and yet the one chief impression I brought away from the book was that to a degree rare even in very small ones it possessed as a whole the great trait of unity. In one's memory, each fact by and by fell into its own place; the chief ones stood out; the lesser sank back into a confused but not inextricable mass of throbbing vitality. And from it all emerged more and more clearly the one central figure who gave his name to the whole—Frederick of Prussia. It was as they bore on him from all quarters of time and space, and as he reacted on them far and wide, that all these events and all these people were brought back out of their dusty graves to live again. Whatever else Carlyle was, the unity of this enormous book proves him, when he chose to be, a Titanic artist."<sup>3</sup> M. Taine felt the power of *Cromwell*: "His narrative," writes the French critic, "resembles that of an eye-witness. A Covenanter who should have collected letters, scraps of newspapers, and had daily added reflec-

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Carlyle in London*, vol. ii, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 284.

<sup>3</sup> *English Composition*, p. 158.

tions, interpretations, notes, and anecdotes, might have written just such a book. At last we are face to face with Cromwell. . . . Would that all history were like this, a selection of texts provided with a commentary! I would exchange for such a history all the regular arguments, all the beautiful colourless narrations of Robertson and Hume.”<sup>1</sup> All in all, wrestlings with combinations of history and biography have ever proved most difficult; Carlyle’s triumphs have scarcely been surpassed.

Of one other type of biography Carlyle left a model in the *Life of John Sterling* (1851). A few years before, Carlyle had written that “there is no heroic poem in the world but is at bottom a biography, the life of a man: also, it may be said, there is no life of a man, faithfully recorded, but is a heroic poem of its sort, rhymed or unrhymed.”<sup>2</sup> It remained for him to produce, in memory of his friend, “an unrhymed heroic poem.” Julius Hare had first written a *Life of Sterling*<sup>3</sup> which, in its account of Sterling’s religious life, did not please Carlyle. “He had waited,” says Froude of Carlyle, in telling the story of the *Life of Sterling*, “partly from want of composure, partly that the dust might settle a little; and now, having leisure on his hands, and being otherwise in the right mood, he re-read Sterling’s letters, collected information from surviving relatives, and without difficulty—indeed, with entire ease and rapidity—he produced in three months what is perhaps the most beautiful biography in the English language. . . . Sterling’s life had been a short one. His history was rather that of the formation of a beautiful character than of accomplished achievement; at once the most difficult to delineate, yet the most instructive if delineated successfully. . . . Some-

<sup>1</sup> *History of English Literature* (Edinburgh, 1871), vol. ii. pp. 470-1.

<sup>2</sup> *Sir Walter Scott*.

<sup>3</sup> Prefixed to *Essays and Tales by John Sterling*, 1848.

thing of the high purpose which Carlyle assigns to Sterling was perhaps reflected from himself, as with a lover's portrait of his mistress; yet his account of him is essentially as true as it is affectionate."<sup>1</sup> The work is much greater than Johnson's *Life of Savage*, which it resembles; indeed it is difficult to find a work with which to compare the *Life of Sterling*: it belongs in the class of those commemorative poems, *Lycidas*, *Thyrsis*, *In Memoriam*. On John Sterling, Carlyle is, beyond all cavil, "definite and final."<sup>2</sup>

More and more, as the century drew near its close, did the conviction deepen that the great biography is a work of art, a created, a "fictive" thing.<sup>3</sup> "The biographer," writes the Rev. Thomas Davidson, "must be more than the mere realist who can photograph facts—he must be something of the idealist as well, for he has to create as well as to reproduce: and we value a biography exactly in proportion as its author has succeeded in creating for us the character of a new man or woman to be added to our own personal acquaintance."<sup>4</sup> It is impossible not to feel the force of this truth; as has been suggested by Gladstone, and as has been proved by so many biographies, no mere transcript can give us a notion of *the man*. Hence arises the necessity of the biographer's being also an artist, and of the

<sup>1</sup> *Carlyle's Life in London*, vol. ii. pp. 68–74.

<sup>2</sup> Trevelyan regrets that Macaulay's prejudice prevented his reading Carlyle's *Sterling*. "Little as he was aware of it, it was no slight privation . . . that one who so keenly relished the exquisite trifling of Plato should never have tasted the description of Coleridge's talk in the *Life of Sterling*—a passage which yields to nothing of its own class in the *Protagoras* or the *Symposium*."—*Life of Macaulay*, vol. ii. p. 460.

<sup>3</sup> Note what Mr. Oliver Elton has to say in this connexion: "In all the dramatic scenes of Scott's life he [Lockhart] shows the power, though he never falls into the risks of the novelist. We do not feel that the scene has been arranged in his fancy afterwards, and the values perverted to give a nobler effect than the truth."—*A Survey of English Literature, 1780–1830*, vol. i. pp. 414–5. Cf. also what Wordsworth wrote, quoted on p. 230 of the present work.

<sup>4</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, article "Biography."

public's conceding to him the freedom to work as an artist. Not thus, indeed, is the task of the biographer lightened; instead it is made far more difficult and dangerous. "Modern scholarship demands, of course, that there shall be no transgressions against the truth"; with this statement of Professor Albert Elmer Hancock we must all agree; but until, in his own phrase again, biography attains "the dramatic vitality of fiction,"<sup>1</sup> we cannot allot to it the highest, indeed its true, place in literature.

The line between truth and fiction in life narrative is perilously shadowy. "The distinction between biography and fiction is easily obliterated when the greatness of the subject has elements of the sublime, and when the temptation to add to the interest of the description by means of exaggeration is strong."<sup>2</sup> At this point, we recognise that in no other department of literature is an author confronted with a more perilous task than when he undertakes to write biography. We are reminded of Egerton Brydges' *Imaginative Biography*, the title of which he explains by saying that he has erected "an imaginary superstructure on the known facts of the biography of eminent characters."<sup>3</sup> Mr. Brydges' volumes contain examples of the method, as the title is a warning of the danger, into which every biographer may stray.

The work faintly shadowed forth by John Boston, and continued from Leland to Rose's *New General Biographical Dictionary*, culminated in this century in the monumental *Dictionary of National Biography*. This work originated in the mind of George Smith in 1881, and, as first contemplated, was to be universal in scope; upon the advice of Leslie Stephen, however, it was determined that it should be only national. Stephen held the editorship from November

<sup>1</sup> A. E. Hancock, *John Keats*.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. W. Stuckenberg, *Life of Immanuel Kant*, Preface.

<sup>3</sup> *Imaginative Biography* (1834), Preface.

1882 until April 1891, when he was succeeded by Sidney Lee, who had been Mr. Stephen's assistant since March 1883, and joint editor of the work from the beginning of 1890. The first volume appeared in January 1885, and, according to plan, the succeeding volumes were issued quarterly without interruption. Thus was fulfilled the design of "a complete dictionary of national biography which should supply full, accurate, and concise biographies of all noteworthy inhabitants of the British Islands and the Colonies (exclusive of living persons) from the earliest historical period to the present." Only one other such work—the *Biographia Britannica*—had ever been brought to completion in England. Not unfittingly was it said that, "Similar works have been produced in foreign countries under the auspices of State-aided literary academies, or have been subsidised by the national exchequers. It is in truer accord with the self-reliant temper of the British race that the *Dictionary of National Biography* is the outcome of private enterprise and the handwork of private citizens."<sup>1</sup> Appleton's *Cyclopædia of American Biography*, edited by James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, 1887-89, while filling an important place, falls far below the *Dictionary of National Biography*, in both plan and execution. It is less definitive, in that it is not limited to deceased persons, and was produced much too rapidly and hence without the proper completeness. A *Dictionary of American Biography* on a proper plan is yet a *desideratum*.

We have heretofore remarked that during this century biography became a business: in no other manner, perhaps, did the extent of this business—and likewise the extent of the demand for biography—make itself so demonstrably evident as in the number and scope of the "Biographical

<sup>1</sup> See "A Statistical Account," vol. lxiii. *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Series" which have become so marked a feature of our time. Mr. John Morley, in 1877, projected the *English Men of Letters* series which became the model for most of those which have followed. We have but to mention the *English Men of Action*, *English Worthies*, *English Statesmen*, *Eminent Women*, *The Queen's Prime Ministers*, *Famous Scots*, *Great Writers*, *Heroes of the Nations*, *Westminster Biographies*, *Great Craftsmen*, *Makers of British Art*, *Modern English Writers*, *Great Educators*, *American Men of Letters*, *The World's Epoch-Makers*, *English Men of Science*, and *The Master Musicians*, to give some notion of the place in English literature filled by these "Biographical Series."

The principal object of these different series is to present in brief compass the essential facts in the lives of the subjects; in other words, most of the biographies assume the form of biographical essays—at best, artistic and delightful sketches; at worst, industrious compilations. "My chief employment at this time," wrote Leslie Stephen to Charles Eliot Norton, "is doing a little book on Sam. Johnson, for a series of which Morley is editor. . . . I am half ashamed of the business in one way, for it seems wicked to pick the plums out of poor old Bozzy, and yet that is all that is to be done."<sup>1</sup> The value of such series for reference has been amply demonstrated by the manner in which they have supplied a demand; the methods employed, apart from the "plum-picking" mentioned by Stephen, are the necessary result of the limits set by the scope of the series, and are nowhere better set forth than in Mrs. Jebb's statement in regard to the volume on *Bentley* contributed by Professor R. C. Jebb to the *English Men of Letters* series. "He greatly enjoyed writing this book," says Mrs. Jebb, "though the

<sup>1</sup> In letter (Dec. 23, 1877) quoted by Frederic Maitland, *Life of Leslie Stephen*, pp. 304-5.



lesson it taught him was never again to have part or lot in a series of any kind. It is a sort of Procrustean bed. No matter how much an author has to tell, his narrative must be cut off if it grows beyond a certain length. Now, his writing was never diffuse, and to compress what was already compressed to the limit of artistic proportion was in his judgment to spoil. . . . When printed it was found to exceed by fifty pages the designated number allotted for the series, and the author had to find what time he could for pruning its excess."<sup>1</sup> In short, the series illustrate commercialised biographical production.

A respectable volume devoted to nineteenth-century criticism of biography could be collected from such reviews as those written by Southey, Scott, Jeffrey, Carlyle, Gladstone, *et al.*, and from prefaces and introductions to biographies, as well as from scattered statements in the biographies themselves. Biography has proceeded, however, without formal study; it is highly significant that no separate volume devoted wholly to the criticism of biography appeared<sup>2</sup> until the publication of Sir Sidney Lee's "Leslie Stephen Lecture" at Cambridge 1911, on the *Principles of Biography*, to which volume we must necessarily go for a brief summation of all the past criticism of English biography. As far back as 1835, it may be pointed out, Francis Jeffrey distinguished three kinds of biographies—those dealing "chiefly with the lives of leaders in great and momentous transactions"; those deriving their interest from diaries and journals, the works of "autobiographers who, without having themselves done anything memorable, have yet had the good luck to live through long and interesting periods"; and those dealing with "philosophers and men of genius and speculation . . . whose biographies are

<sup>1</sup> *Life of R. C. Jebb*, pp. 232-5.

<sup>2</sup> Except the brief sketch by Edward Edwards in *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography* (1885).

to be regarded either as supplements to the works they have given to the world, or substitutes for those which they might have given . . . histories, not of men, but of minds." <sup>1</sup> These types are recognised to-day substantially as set forth by Jeffrey.

It was in this review, also, that Jeffrey pleaded the cause of the man of letters. He pleaded, likewise, for the recognition of what Johnson called the art of "writing trifles with dignity." "Wheresoever there is power and native genius," wrote Jeffrey, "we cannot but grudge the suppression of the least of its revelations; and are persuaded that with those who can judge of such intellects, they will never lose anything by the most lavish and indiscriminate disclosures. Which of Swift's most elaborate productions is at this day half so interesting as that most confidential Journal to Stella? Or which of them, with all its utter carelessness of expression, its manifold contradictions, its infantine fondness, and all its quick-shifting moods, of kindness, selfishness, anger, and ambition, gives us half so strong an impression either of his amiableness or his vigour? How much, in like manner, is Johnson raised in our estimation, not only as to intellect but personal character, by the industrious eavesdropping of Boswell, setting down day by day in his notebook the fragments of his most loose and unweighed conversations? Or what, in fact, is there so precious in the works or the histories of eminent men from Cicero to Horace Walpole as collections of their private and familiar letters? What would we not give for such a journal—such notes of conversations, or such letters, of Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Spenser? The mere drudges or coxcombs of literature may indeed suffer by such disclosures—as made-up beauties might do by being caught

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, Oct. 1835, "Memoirs of Sir James Mackintosh"; *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review*, vol. iv. pp. 501-7.

in undress: but all who are really worth knowing about will, on the whole, be gainers; and we should be well content to have no biographies but of those who would profit, as well as their readers, by being shown in new or in nearer lights. . . . So far, therefore, from thinking the biography of men of genius barren or unprofitable because presenting few events or personal adventures, we cannot but regard it, when constructed in substance of such materials as we have now mentioned, as the most instructive and interesting of all writing—embodying truth and wisdom in the vivid distinctness of a personal presentment—enabling us to look on genius in its first elementary stirrings, and in its weakness as well as its strength—and teaching us at the same time great moral lessons, both as to the value of labour, and industry, and the necessity of virtues, as well as intellectual endowments, for the attaining of lasting excellence.” The nineteenth was the century of triumph for men of letters, and for just such biographical representation as Jeffrey here discusses.

A great century of fulfilment it was in this department of letters! With a flood of what was worthless or only ephemeral, there were also produced a few works which must long endure. A tribute is also due to the English reading public in that, in an age reputedly given up to the reading of fiction, readers have demanded biography in quantity well nigh equal to that of fiction. A century which produced so many men worthy of record, so many biographies worthy of their subjects, and readers in such abundance, is a century worthy of the most careful study, and one destined to leave a lasting impression upon the life of mankind.

## CHAPTER VIII

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, no less truly than biography, was characteristic of the nineteenth century. A student of the form is at first inclined to be overwhelmed by what seems an "embarrassment of riches." He soon discovers, however, that excellence is rare, and that the line of development, if somewhat subtle, is yet clear. We have already seen that biography has developed in the direction of a method—a method more or less carefully followed by all competent biographers. The development of autobiography, on the other hand, has been in the direction of a manner—and that a manner of personal revelation. There are vital differences between biography and autobiography. Biography has been admirably referred to as "a study sharply defined by two definite events, birth and death." Thus, a true biography is complete—it is a finished product wrought by an artist out of materials apart from himself. The true autobiography, however, is but a torso—it cannot be complete; and it is spun from the very vitals of its author. We must expect, then, in autobiography, wide manifestations of personality with much less limitation of method than in biography. The study of nineteenth-century autobiography becomes, therefore, a study of lives personally revealed—of personal revelations falling into groups determined not so much by conscious purpose or imitation as by similarity of mind and character, or by the force of some dominant intellectual movement.

In the light of these considerations, it becomes evident

that autobiography impinges upon the realm of psychology; autobiographies are psychological documents of the greatest importance. It is significant, in this connexion, that the only books in the English language devoted exclusively to a consideration of autobiography—Anna Robeson Burr's *The Autobiography*, and *Religious Confessions and Confessants*—are written from the psychological point of view.<sup>1</sup> The pioneer work of Mrs. Burr in this department of literature and psychology helps us to an understanding of principles involved in the manifest tendency of English autobiography to arrange itself into groups.

Mrs. Burr, following Gustave Le Bon, points out that all persons writing their own lives during the same decade or half century would not necessarily fall into the same group. It has already been remarked, for example, that different groups may exist during the same era: thus, in England, the Quaker journalists form a separate and distinct cluster, unconnected with the secular personal records of the time. Sporadic cases of self-study occur wholly outside of any contemporary influences. Where people have met and known one another, or observed and imitated one another, or have merely fallen under similar prevailing influences, we are warranted in grouping them together. Where contemporary self-biographies display the same methods of presentation, the same subjective view-point, similar sides of frankness, similar corners of reticence, we are warranted in grouping them together. As to the personal influence exerted by an autobiographer, and the imitation consequent thereupon, definite conclusions are not possible. "Proof in chapter and verse," remarks Mrs. Burr, "is not always

<sup>1</sup> These books, it may be well to state, are not limited to a discussion of English works; they are comparative studies. The reader's attention is also called to a recent German work, Georg Misch's *Geschichte der Autobiographie*. So far as I know these are the only books dealing directly with the subject.

forthcoming; the subject himself may be ignorant of an act of imitation which seems plain to the observer. Man is here yet again the child at play. Once the student of these narratives has come to cultivate a feeling for personal influences, difficult as they may be to analyse and define, there grows up a conviction on the whole subject that is deep and unshakable."

Four clearly defined groups may thus be discerned in the nineteenth century: a group of imitators of Franklin and Gibbon; a group of literary self-analysers, religious and introspective in tone; a scientific group; and a literary artistic group formed about the Pre-Raphaelite movement.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these groups, there exists a great body of self-biographers who seem to have written for no other reason than that they were "driven into a fashion of self-explanation which belonged to the time."<sup>2</sup>

The autobiographies of Franklin and Gibbon—to which may be added that of David Hume—have been recognised since their publication as classics. They stimulated many others to write similar records, most of which follow the prototypes at a great distance. Every one who is in the least familiar with English literature knows of the autobiographies of Franklin, Gibbon, and Hume; perhaps it is only to the specialist that the names of Thomas Holcroft, William Hutton, Richard Edgeworth, James Lackington, Samuel Romilly, Catherine Cappe, Thomas Bewick, and William Gifford are familiar. It would be difficult to determine the extent of direct stimulation to self-delineation exerted by these three works; it is, however, a matter of literary history that the habit of autobiography followed immediately and extensively in their wake.

In the group of literary self-analysers we observe a

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, pp. 300–2.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase occurs in Mrs. Oliphant's *Autobiography*, pp. 4–5, and was written in 1885.

remarkable diversity of purpose and personality. The sad wail of Egerton Brydges fills two volumes of a work interesting because it shows "how a man of real talent and love of literature may live a long life with a longing desire to do something great, and then 'die and make no sign.'" <sup>1</sup> John Galt tells his life story because it occurred to him that his own adventures were as singular as those of the heroes of many novels and that it might be as easy to draw for the materials of a book on the memory as upon the imagination; in addition to which motive he adds, "I had a mercenary object in view, besides other considerations." William Wordsworth in *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, "undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them." *The Prelude* he intended as merely introductory to *The Recluse*, the two works "to have the same relation to each other as the ante-chapel has to the body of a Gothic church"; his minor pieces, "properly arranged, were to have such connexion with the main work as to give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in those edifices." In short, Wordsworth deliberately planned and brought partially to completion a vast autobiographical temple in verse, and thus stands unique among the autobiographers of the century.<sup>2</sup> Leigh Hunt says of his autobiography that "a more involuntary production it would be difficult to conceive"; whereas Sir Samuel Romilly records that he wrote "for himself, himself alone." Coleridge called the *Biographia Literaria* "an immethodical miscellany."

The scientific group, containing some great names—Darwin, Huxley, Bain, Mill, Wallace—all of whom wrote

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Longfellow, *Life of H. W. Longfellow*, vol. i. p. 331.

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth also wrote a brief prose autobiographical sketch which forms chapter ii. of Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*.

their lives with "the scientific intention," is best represented by Herbert Spencer's "natural history of himself," of which the "two immense volumes, for thoroughness, veracity, and scrupulous exactness, form the culminating achievement of scientific self-delineation." The literary-artistic group formed about the Pre-Raphaelite movement, containing the names of W. Holman Hunt, W. M. Rossetti, and John Addington Symonds, came to fullest expression in the *Praeterita* of John Ruskin.

Mrs. Burr has shown quite convincingly that the subjective tendency rises during certain social and mental conditions, and falls during others; and that this process is the same whatever the nation. Comparison shows that *the conditions under which the subjective tendency rises or falls are similar conditions*. The general law made manifest may be thus stated: *The subjective autobiography groups itself about the great intellectual movements and changes of the world, and lessens or disappears in times of material change*. In England, political activities keep the percentage of self-examinations extremely low until much later than in other countries. English literature shows cases of this kind no earlier than 1600. Of twenty important secular autobiographies written before 1700, but six are personal. The violent fluctuations just after the Restoration, followed by the Quaker and other religious movements, mark the first high point; the second is not reached until the nineteenth century when the great scientific upheaval shifted the whole intellectual point of view.

"Just as the iron filings rise and cluster about a magnet," concludes Mrs. Burr, "so do men's individualities rise to expression under the influence of a current of thought. The impulse is not to be explained by the general theory that warlike periods of national life are apt to be followed by an outburst of literary and creative energy. The English



and Italian tables [of autobiography] both give examples of the rise in the self-study at a time of general literary stagnation, preceding marked intellectual changes. The English scientific group begins at the very ebb of the greater literary activities of the nineteenth century. Find the dawn of new ideas, find the moment when men's minds begin to submit to the shaking power of an intellectual change, and there you will find the attempt at self-understanding expressed in a group of personal records. The observation of great movements at work in himself causes a man fresh interest in himself: the observation of a similar movement at work in others makes a man wish to state his position, to define his *credo*. The atmosphere of doubt, restlessness, insecurity, caused by intellectual upheavals, produces in the serious mind a desire to clear the ground for himself, and to aid others—produces, in a word, the autobiographical intention. And so we find these cases following the law, and grouping themselves about movements of intellectual significance.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the miscellaneous, ungrouped autobiographies of the century we find the most diverse manifestations of personality. They vary all the way from the “wandering memorials of my own life and casual experiences,” as Thomas De Quincey calls his *Autobiographic Sketches*, and the dream-phantasies of his *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, to General Ulysses S. Grant's straightforward and soldierly *Memoirs*. Cardinal Newman reveals himself in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*; his brother, Francis Newman, in the *Phases of Faith*. Lord Broughton and Augustus J. C. Hare are as voluminous as Mrs. Oliphant and Philip Gilbert Hamerton are brief. The kind of autobiographical document produced is governed by the personality of the writer; we do not know just what to expect when we pick up such a

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography*, pp. 186-7.

document for the first time any more than we know what to expect when we are introduced for the first time to some one whom we have never before seen or heard of. The manner is the method—a part of the man himself.

In all the realm of English autobiographical literature there exists no more poignantly sad, pathetic narrative than the fragment left by Mrs. Oliphant. Of the many volumes written by this brave, overworked little woman it is the one which deserves to live longest. In the most unassuming manner—touched perhaps by a little too much of self-pity—she tells the story of a life upon which sorrows crowded in swift succession and over which hung much of the gloom voiced in Greek poetry; as we read, a fragment of the Greek anthology insistently echoes through our consciousness:

“ Alas! Peristera, sad ills you bore;  
The Fates work ever thus,  
And the worst evils that they have in store  
Are never far from us.”<sup>1</sup>

Although her sketch closes with a note of despair which renders further utterance impossible, the whole is not the work of a pessimist. In spite of heaped-up sorrow, Mrs. Oliphant never lost faith in the eternal goodness of God; she was one of those who “marched breast forward, never doubting clouds would break.”

Lord Broughton's *Recollections of a Long Life*, and Augustus J. C. Hare's *The Story of my Life*, each extending to six volumes, exhibit the extreme length to which recent autobiographies have attained. The work of Mr. Hare is more typical; that of Lord Broughton, privately printed in five volumes in 1865, was not given to the public until 1909, when his daughter, Lady Dorchester, taking the early

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Pott's translation from Leonidas, in *Greek Love Songs and Epigrams*, pp. 29-30 (first series).

part of the five volumes as a basis, incorporated therewith portions of diaries and published works. Mr. Hare, however, completed his own design—a design thus described by himself: “My story is a very long one, and though only, as Sir C. Bowen would have called it, ‘a ponderous biography of nobody,’ is told in great—most people will say in far too much—detail. But to me it seems as if it were in the petty details, not in the great results, that the real interest of every existence lies. I think, also, though it may be considered a strange thing to say, that the true picture of a whole life—at least an English life—has never yet been painted, and certainly all the truth of such a picture must come from its delicate touches. Then, though most readers of this story will only read parts of it, they are sure to be different parts.”<sup>1</sup> The minuteness and prolixity of Mr. Hare’s work may well be set over against the condensation and brevity of David Hume’s life story. English literature thus contains admirable examples of both the brief and the long autobiography.

The tendency of autobiography to merge into fiction grew increasingly apparent during this century. We have already noted John Galt’s observation that “it might be as easy to draw for the materials of a book on the memory as upon the imagination”; from the point of view of the reader, he remarked that “a man must not forget, that however important the incidents of his life may be to himself, the general body of readers will regard his memoirs but as a common book, and never trouble themselves, in pursuit of pastime, to ascertain whether what they read consists of fact or fiction.”<sup>2</sup> This carelessness on the part of readers as to the distinction between fact and fiction may or may not be the reason for the increasing fictional element.

<sup>1</sup> *The Story of My Life*, vol. i. Preface.

<sup>2</sup> *The Literary Life of John Galt*, vol. i. p. 338.

Suffice it to say, the tendency is present and is recognised. "The question of what is actual autobiography and what is so coloured as to become practically fiction, must always be a matter of opinion."<sup>1</sup> In no autobiographical documents is the question more apparent than in George Borrow's *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*. Borrow's biographers agree that, in the main, the two works are autobiographical; that it was Borrow's original intention that *Lavengro* especially should be so.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty is where to draw the line. "'What is autobiography?' Borrow once asked Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton (who had called his attention to 'several bold coincidences in *Lavengro*'). 'Is it the mere record of the incidents of a man's life? or is it a picture of the man himself—his character, his soul?'"<sup>3</sup> The question is not yet settled.

After all these centuries we may well ask what form English autobiography has attained. As a general fact, we may say that it is, on the whole, much more full and explicit than biography, with less of concealment. The development of English prose style has influenced it appreciably, though one cannot say that, on the whole, since the days of Franklin, Gibbon, and Hume, the style of autobiography has grown remarkably better. Whatever gain there has been in organic structure is still blurred by the fact that autobiography is fragmentary and governed by the whims of the writer. On but one point is there

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Jenkins, *The Life of George Borrow*, p. 396.

<sup>2</sup> See Jenkins' *Life of Borrow* and William I. Knapp's *Life, Writings, and Correspondence of George Borrow*, *passim*. "In 1851 appeared the first of two remarkable books, *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, in which George Borrow, if he did not exactly create, brought to perfection from some points of view what may be called the autobiographic novel."—George Saintsbury, *The English Novel*, pp. 255-6.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Herbert Jenkins in *Life of Borrow*, p. 396, from "Notes upon George Borrow" prefaced to an edition of *Lavengro* issued by Ward, Lock & Co.

manifest agreement among autobiographers. "I must so far follow the method of autobiographers as to begin with a few notices of my birth," wrote Egerton Brydges. To begin with the pedigree—and in many instances to carry it to inordinate length—has become a general autobiographical habit. Add to this habit the prominent element of apology—for since the beginning these self-biographers have seemed to feel that they are called upon to justify their work—and the points of agreement are practically exhausted. It is scarcely too much to say that every autobiographer is a law unto himself.

We have but to read autobiographies to discover the diversities of opinion existing among the writers themselves as to just what material should be included. They vary, in theory and in practice, from the statement of Egerton Brydges, that "it is not the business of a self-memorialist merely to give the characters of others, which he has had an opportunity of observing; to apply a mirror to his own heart is his first business,"<sup>1</sup> to that of Francis Jeffrey: "Life has often been compared to a journey; and the simile seems to hold better in nothing than in the identity of the rules by which those who write their travels, and those who write their lives, should be governed. When a man returns from visiting any celebrated region, we expect to hear much more of the remarkable things and persons he has seen, than of his own personal transactions; and are naturally disappointed if, after saying that he lived much with illustrious statesmen or heroes, he chooses rather to tell us of his own travelling equipage, or of his cookery and servants, than to give us any account of the character and conversation of those distinguished persons.

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, vol. i. p. 277. In vol. ii. p. 231, Mr. Brydges also remarks that "if inward workings are not frankly disclosed, nothing is done."

In the same manner, when, at the close of a long life spent in circles of literary and political celebrity, an author sits down to give the world an account of his retrospections, it is reasonable to stipulate that he shall talk less of himself than of his associates.”<sup>1</sup>

Practically all autobiographers agree that truth should be striven for. “A memoir-writer may delude himself, but he must not falsify. If he does delude, the delusion forms part of his character; and he must take the consequence.”<sup>2</sup> Herbert Spencer, however, is of the conviction that such truth can be only approximated: “At first sight it seems possible for one who narrates his own life and draws his own portrait to be quite truthful; but it proves to be impossible. There are various media which distort the things seen through them, and an autobiography is a medium which produces some irremediable distortions.”<sup>3</sup>

There is a consensus of opinion, on the other hand, that it is impossible for an autobiographer to conceal the manner of man that he is. “It has frequently been said that an autobiography must of necessity be an untrue representation of its subject, as no man can judge himself correctly. If it is intended to imply that somebody else, having a much slighter acquaintance with the man whose life is to be narrated, would produce a more truthful book, one may be permitted to doubt the validity of the inference. Thousands of facts are known to a man himself with reference to his career, and a multitude of determinant motives, which are not known even to his most intimate friends, still less to the stranger who so often undertakes the biography. The reader of an autobiography has this additional advantage, that the writer must be unconsciously revealing himself

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, April 1806; *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review*, vol. iv. pp. 403-4, review of *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland*.

<sup>2</sup> Egerton Brydges, *Autobiography*, vol. ii. p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, vol. ii. p. 28.

all along, merely by his way of telling things.”<sup>1</sup> Leslie Stephen voiced the same sentiment: “It may be reckoned . . . as a special felicity that an autobiography, alone of all books, may be more valuable in proportion to the amount of misrepresentation which it contains. We do not wonder when a man gives a false character to his neighbour, but it is always curious to see how a man continues to present a false testimonial to himself. It is pleasant to be admitted behind the scenes and to trace the growth of that singular phantom, which, like the Spectre of the Brocken, is the man’s own shadow cast upon the coloured and distorted mists of memory.”<sup>2</sup>

An examination of English autobiography discloses the fact—so far, at least, as a reader may judge—that the writers of their own lives have been unusually frank and full in their self-revelations. “It may be said,” remarks Egerton Brydges, “that almost all men wish to appear to the whole world in a character which does not belong to them, and that by their own pens they will most probably portray themselves in that character. Experience proves that this has not been the case with autobiographers; and that many things have been thus known and admitted to be true, which would otherwise have died with the writers.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this truthfulness has had something to do with the fact that most autobiographies have been posthumously published; the authors have no doubt shrunk from facing the truth in cold print, in their own lifetime. “Many,” says Mr. Brydges, “have written an autobiography; but few have had the courage to let them appear during their own lives.”<sup>4</sup>

All in all, the nineteenth century brought forth a notable

<sup>1</sup> P. G. Hamerton, *Autobiography*, pp. i-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Hours in a Library*, vol. iii. p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, vol. ii. p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 414.

body of autobiography. All classes of English-speaking people, from the highest to the lowest, have written their stories "with their own hands." He who would understand the genius of this people in its varied manifestations need only turn to this branch of English literature. He will meet a large and strangely assorted company, and may leave it with the bewildered impression that one so often feels in leaving such assemblies. Whether or not he carries away from this company of autobiographers any impression of definite, unified groups—and it is very probable that he will—he will at least bear with him the feeling that he has met the English-speaking world in little, that in the microcosm he has come to know the macrocosm.



## CHAPTER IX

## PROBLEMS AND TENDENCIES OF THE PRESENT

ALONG with its rich contribution, the past has bequeathed many problems. Some of these are persistent, and seem to defy positive solution. After centuries of experimentation, there emerges, for instance, no best order of arrangement. What Isaac Watts wrote in 1725 in regard to methods of procedure employed by biographers applies as truly to-day as when it was first written: "So in writing the Lives of men, which is called biography," the words are from the *Logic*,<sup>1</sup> "some authors follow the track of their years and place everything in the precise order of time when it occurred; others throw the temper and character of the persons, their private life, their public stations, their personal occurrences, their domestic conduct, their speeches, their books or writings, their sickness and death, into so many distinct chapters." By some writers of the eighteenth century the problems were passed over lightly. "The biographer and historian," we are quoting from the Rev. Samuel Burdy, "have materials provided for them; their business then is only to arrange with skill and express with perspicuity."<sup>2</sup> The "only" so easily and casually inserted by Mr. Burdy does not lessen the difficulties; biographers still find that efforts to arrange with skill and to execute with perspicuity require all the power and ability that can be summoned.

Apart from these technical problems, perhaps the greatest is to differentiate history from biography. This is a very

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 516-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Philip Skelton* (1792), p. 71, of the Oxford University Press edition, in which the work is now easily accessible.

old problem, arising out of the fact that biography was for so long considered merely a branch of history. From the days of George Cavendish, 'most biographers have had occasion to refer to their difficulties in dealing with this problem. "Many writers have divided the *reign* of a prince from his *life*, and so have given the *actions* without the *man*; the political occurrences without the genius that gave a rise and a turn to them." In these words the line of demarcation is clearly drawn; the danger of failure resulting from such division is as clearly suggested. A solution seems necessary, and to the writer in question the solution lay along the path of compromise: "It shall be the present design to write the life as well as the reign of this unfortunate prince [Charles I.], and give all the true characters of his person along with a relation of all the affairs of his government."<sup>1</sup> Attempts to arrive at a better or a different solution have been many.

The theoretical elements of the problem have been well stated by the Rev. Edward Edwards. Mr. Edwards was not alone a theorist, however; in his *Life of Sir Walter Raleigh* he was face to face with the difficulties which he sets forth.<sup>2</sup> He was, in addition, a careful and enthusiastic student of biography in general. We quote his statements at length:

"Part of the enduring charm of biographical literature seems to be close akin to the charms of dramatic art. And that resemblance might, perhaps, be made the basis of a somewhat more sharply

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<sup>1</sup> Kennet's *History of England*, Anonymous *Life and Reign of Charles I.*

<sup>2</sup> Students of biography will be interested in this *Life of Raleigh*. In it, Mr. Edwards made the attempt to refrain from the delineation of "great national transactions . . . even by way of giving an historical background to his own humble theme." He also printed Raleigh's letters in a volume separate from the *Life*. Thus, remarks the author, "readers will find in it a two-fold departure from methods which, of late years, have become very common in English biography." The work was published in 1868.

defined distinction between the proper province of 'biography' and that of 'history,' than is given in the current definitions. It has been said that 'biography' is the life of a man; 'history' the life of a nation. There is truth, as well as point, in the saying. But plainly, the definition does not carry all the truth. A good biography has a dramatic interest (though not a dramatic completeness) about it, to which the best history of a nation can never attain. In the well-told story of any energetic and individual life there is always an undercurrent of tragedy, so to speak. We cannot feel for the fortunes of a crowd of men, as we feel for the fortunes of one particular man. Very few, perhaps, of those that read attentively the story of a really memorable life, are insensible to the temptation, as they reach the closing pages, of turning back again to the opening pages. Whether or not the writer may have tried to 'sum up' the life he has been narrating, most thoughtful readers feel constrained to make a summary and an estimate of their own. They are led to compare the early promise with the late performance; the long toils of the seed-time with the hurried joys of harvest. They strive to realise, within their own minds, some of those many personal retrospections which they are sure must have given colour—bright or sombre—to the last days, and to the latest thoughts, of the man they have been reading about. Such readers get to feel, as with the vividness of personal experience, that the most successful and best-rounded life is always incomplete, and almost always, in a measure, tragic. They see that the man who has been, in appearance, most thoroughly enabled by an Almighty Overruler, to do with his life what, in his youthful and best moments, he planned to do with it, has yet fallen far short of his aspirations; and that his life is fragmentary. They ask themselves, 'Is this, in truth, *the end*?'—'Is it not, rather, a beginning?' Such questions as these do not so readily arise in our minds as we read of the revolutions of empires, or the vicissitudes of nations. . . .

"We commonly speak, indeed, of the 'national mind'—the 'national responsibilities'—the 'national life.' And there is neither vagueness nor strain in such language. A people has continuity of spirit beneath change of form, not less truly—though diversely—than has a nation. The historian who fails to bring out the collective life of a nation, as well as its outward story, misses his function as certainly as does the biographer who tells the sayings and doings of his subject from cradle to grave, but tells them in a way that throws no ray of light on the growth of his intellect, or the life of his soul. With spiritual life (in the truest sense of the term) the historian is not concerned. The collective life of a nation has its boundaries and

its term. That national life has very far-reaching issues. But they are all finite. . . .

"When one man has for a time almost embodied the collective life of a nation, how ought the mere biographer to deal—or attempt to deal—with the individual and personal career of the man as distinguished from the career of the monarch or temporary leader of a people? Does such a man belong to biography at all? . . .

"In the most ordinary lives—if they be worth telling at all—the biographer has a two-columned story to tell, or to interweave. There is the column of outward incidents, and also the column of that intellectual and spiritual growth which is being continually evolved beneath them. Must the biographer in these exceptional cases [such as those of Napoleon and Frederick the Great] attempt to fill three columns in parallel fulness—the third of them being hardly less than the story of a nation? The biographer who should attempt *that* would as surely destroy the proper unity of his work as such an unity has been, many times, destroyed by some painters of battle-pieces. The too-ambitious artist has occasionally striven to depict a battle by exhibiting upon his canvas the muster-rolls of two armies. The result has been a vast crowd of figures which only depict 'a battle' in the unfortunate sense that they are mutually destructive. The prudent biographer will, perhaps, be inclined to solve the difficulty by handing over much of his second column, and nearly all of the third, to the historian—whenever he has to deal with the Napoleons and the Fredericks. To chronicle the doings of men of that class is the historian's province. To make some roughly effective summary of these doings, in the way of epitome or extract, will be all that can fairly come within the province of biography. The real biographer cannot, indeed, conceive of a Napoleon whose inmost mental and spiritual history has not been shaped by that wonderful life-itinerary which began at Ajaccio to end at Longwood. He cannot sever, even in thought, the plastic working of the studious days at Auxonne, or of the conversations at Beaucaire, from that of the exultant moments of Austerlitz, or the bitter hours of Waterloo. But he will not, on that account, incur the danger of becoming a mere annalist in a vain attempt to unite two several functions, each of which is arduous enough to put a strain on mental power at its best."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography*, pp. 13–22. This work, by the Rev. Edward Edwards in collaboration with the Rev. Charles Hole, was projected in eight parts, of which only the first, "General Biography extending over all Ages," was printed, in pamphlet form, at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, 1885. The edition consisted of only 250 copies. The most interesting and illuminative paragraphs are reprinted in the present work.

In the light of the quotations just given it is well to consider the actual practice of a number of biographers who have found themselves confronted by this problem in its strongest aspects. Few modern biographers have shirked the difficulty; most have attempted a solution. "To enter the domain of history by the pathway of biography," observes Sir Henry Craik, "is a task beset with peculiar doubts and difficulties. How far is it permissible to stray from the narrow pathway we have chosen, and expatiate upon aspects of the time, which do not fall within the personal experience of him whose life we attempt to portray? If we restrict ourselves too much, we move blindfolded along an obscure track; if we range too freely, we lose the identity of the single stream we seek to follow amidst a multitude of devious channels. In writing a biography—above all, in writing the biography of one who has played a large part in the leading transactions of his time—we must build up for ourselves a structure of general history; and having done so, we must then knock ruthlessly away, like temporary scaffolding, all that is not essential to the personal figure which we attempt to present. . . . I am aware that, by some, the biographical aspects of history may be esteemed as but a subsidiary matter, falling beneath the dignity of its more severe domain, and of its larger theories, and foreign to what, in modern jargon, is called the science of history. But in the general, and not unsound, judgment of mankind, these aspects can never lose their permanent interest."<sup>1</sup>

"In what we are to say," writes Walter Sichel at the beginning of his *Bolingbroke and his Times*, "we shall try to avoid the error which mistakes a sequence of dates for an intelligence of energies—the style which is a mere *nuntia vetustatis*, as well as that second-hand repetition of

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Edward Earl of Clarendon*, Preface.

prejudice which, in Bolingbroke's own words, 'converts history into authorised romance.' Character even more than achievement will be our study. To interpret events by character and not character by events, is the true historical method. For, indeed, the peruser of chronicles is too often reminded of an auction in some ancient manor. The garniture is dispersed in order and catalogued for sale. The inventories are tritely truthful and superficially solid. But the mainspring of memories, the intimacies of association are wanting; the ghosts that haunt the whispering corridors are invisible and neglected. It is a sale of dead lumber."<sup>1</sup>

To no one, perhaps, was the problem presented in more serious form than to John Morley. "Every reader will perceive," such are Mr. Morley's words, "that perhaps the sharpest of all the many difficulties of my task has been to draw the line between history and biography—between the fortunes of the community and the exploits, thoughts, and purposes of the individual who had so marked a share in them. In the case of men of letters, in whose lives our literature is admirably rich, this difficulty happily for their authors and for our delight does not arise. But where the subject is a man who was four times at the head of the government—no phantom, but dictator—and who held this office of first minister for a longer time than any other statesman in the reign of the Queen, how can we tell the story of his works and days without reference, and ample reference, to the course of events over whose unrolling he presided, and out of which he made history? . . . Assuredly I am not presumptuous enough to suppose that this difficulty of fixing the precise scale between history and biography has been successfully overcome by me. It may be that Hercules himself would have succeeded little better."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i. p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, vol. i. pp. 1-2.

“For a thing so commonly attempted,” the words are from the Preface of Winston Spencer Churchill’s *Lord Randolph Churchill*, “political biography is difficult. The style and ideas of the writer must throughout be subordinated to the necessity of embracing in the text those documentary proofs upon which the story depends. Letters, memoranda, and extracts from speeches, which inevitably and rightly interrupt the sequence of his narrative, must be pieced together upon some consistent and harmonious plan. It is not by the soft touches of a picture, but in hard mosaic or tessellated pavement, that a man’s life and fortunes must be presented in all their reality and romance. I have thought it my duty, so far as possible, to assemble once and for all the whole body of historical evidence required for the understanding of Lord Randolph Churchill’s career.”

Arthur Christopher Benson had before him a difficult problem in ecclesiastical history in writing the life of his father, Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury. “There appeared no choice,” says Mr. Benson in the Preface, “between slowly and gradually evolving an elaborate work, which should be a minute contribution to the ecclesiastical history of the time—and for that my professional life as well as my own capacity afforded me little opportunity—and sketching in broad outlines and rapid strokes, with as much living detail as possible, a biographical portrait. . . . It seemed better to attempt to draw as careful a picture of my father’s life and character as possible, and to touch on events through the medium of personality rather than reveal personality through events. . . .”

In concluding a discussion of this problem we may bear in mind the opinions of two modern writers qualified to speak as well by study of the subject as by actual practice

in writing biography. "Broad views," in the opinion of Edmund Gosse, "are entirely out of place in biography, and there is no greater literary mistake than to attempt what is called the 'Life and Times' of a man. . . . History deals with fragments of the vast roll of events; it must always begin abruptly and close in the middle of affairs; it must always deal, impartially, with a vast number of persons. Biography is a study sharply defined by two definite events, birth and death. It fills its canvas with one figure, and other characters, however great in themselves, must always be subsidiary to the central hero."<sup>1</sup> Leslie Stephen offers a solution: "The provinces of the historian and the biographer are curiously distinct, although they are closely related. History is of course related to biography inasmuch as most events are connected with some particular person. . . . And, on the other hand, every individual life is to some extent an indication of the historical conditions of the time. . . . And yet, the curious thing is the degree in which this fact can be ignored on both sides. If we look at any of the ordinary collections of biographical material, we shall constantly be struck by the writer's unconsciousness of the most obvious inferences. . . . Thus, I have sometimes noticed that a man may be in one sense a most accomplished biographer; that is, he can tell you off-hand a vast number of facts, genealogical, official, and so forth, and yet has never, as we say, put two and two together. I have read lives giving minute details about the careers of authors, which yet prove unmistakably that the writers had no general knowledge of the literature of the period. A man will know every fact about all the people mentioned, say, in Boswell, and yet have no conception of the general position of Johnson, or Burke, or Goldsmith in English literature. . . . Now the first office of the biographer is to

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, article "Biography."



facilitate what I may call the proper reaction between biography and history; to make each study throw all possible light on the other; and so to give fresh vitality to two different lines of study, which, though their mutual dependence is obvious, can yet be divorced so effectually by the mere Dryasdust."<sup>1</sup> The problem, however, yet remains; in the practical solution of it, biographers of the present and the future will find full scope for their energies, and the manner of its solution will no doubt constitute the chief contribution yet to be made to the development of biography.

It would seem that biographers, in the toils of such material as they are frequently called upon to struggle with, are not free to work as they choose. We witness their painful endeavours; we listen to their complaints; we accept their apologies. In the face of such struggles, such complaints, such apologies, we come to feel that there must be such a thing as *pure biography*, and that it is for the attainment of this that every true biographer is panting. Trevelyan telling us that in the *Life of Macaulay* he touches politics only "in order to show to what extent Macaulay was a politician, and for how long," or avoiding criticism of Macaulay's literary labours in the expressed belief that "it is not the province of biography to dilate upon works which are already before the world"; Morley openly passing over "the detailed history of Mr. Gladstone as theologian and churchman"; Edmund Gosse discussing the scientific labours of his father, Philip Henry Gosse, only in so far as they throw light upon the personality of the man; Benson explaining that he will not attempt to write the full story of his father's ecclesiastical career; Robert S. Rait affirming, "If I have written a defence of the General whose life I have attempted to tell, it is

<sup>1</sup> *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. i. pp. 12-15.

because my materials made such a defence the only possible form that a biography of Lord Gough could take"—in these typical examples we have ample testimony to the feeling of limitation—the hampering influence of a difficulty hard to surmount. All would evidently like to avoid the problems involved and write only of the man. Perhaps to do so is not entirely possible. In the case of literary men there would seem to be most possibility of attaining to pure biography.

The problem of dealing with genealogical details confronts the biographer of the present. Since the publication of Oldys' *Life of Raleigh*, there has been a growing tendency to go into ancestral details, a tendency that has been greatly strengthened by the elaborate research methods so characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is arising in the minds of many the question whether such long and detailed treatment of genealogy is necessary for biography. Boswell gets along very well without introducing much of ancestral record in the *Life of Johnson*; it is a question whether Lockhart's *Life of Scott* is the better for the length of such record. "The interest in our ancestors," comments Andrew Lang, "'without whose life we had not been,' may be regarded as a foible, and was made matter of reproach, both to Scott and his biographer. . . . Scott was anxious to realise his own ancestry to his imagination; . . . whatever he had in himself he would fain have made out a hereditary claim for. In this taste there is not wanting a domestic piety; and science, since Sir Walter's day, has approved of his theory, that the past of our race revives in each of us." <sup>1</sup> We must take into consideration, also, the statement of Carlyle that "the history of a man's childhood is the description of his parents and environment." <sup>2</sup> In the face of all this, however, there is evidence

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Letters of Lockhart*, vol. i. pp. 1-2.    <sup>2</sup> *Life of Sterling*.

that many will follow Froude's biographer: "In reading biographies," admits Mr. Paul, "I always skip the genealogical details. To be born obscure and to die famous has been described as the acme of human felicity. However that may be, whether fame has anything to do with happiness or no, it is a man himself, and not his ancestors, whose life deserves, if it does deserve, to be written. Such was Froude's own opinion, and it is the opinion of most sensible people."<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of science, the details of a man's ancestry may be highly valuable, and for such purpose may be duly set forth in a scientific work. On the other hand, there is not much doubt that hereafter the canon of unity will rule out of biography proper the most of genealogical detail. We may look, in the future, to see all save the strictly relevant genealogical details relegated to an appendix.

Ever since the value of correspondence became evident to biographers, letters have been made use of freely. The problem of the proper method of adapting correspondence to the uses of biography yet confronts writers; it has been given careful consideration, and there is a growing conviction that instead of lessening the difficulties of a biographer, a vast quantity of correspondence only increases them:

"To correspondence, biography is so much indebted that its subtraction would devastate that section of our libraries. Many a huge and precious volume would shrivel into the mere husk of what it was, if deprived of the letters which gave it both substance and vitality. But none the less is it true that the best letters that were ever written in fullest series, are a wretched substitute for a real biography. A correspondence worth preserving should be preserved apart. What the true biographer has to do with it is to use it. The more he can extract of its purport; the more he can absorb of its spirit; the better will be his book. The more he thrusts it in bodily—how admirable so ever in itself—the more will his book be a thing of shreds and patches. To depict worthily and enduringly any

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Froude*, p. 1.

human life really deserving to be depicted, is a task which was never yet achieved without a strain on all the faculty the writer could yet gather for the occasion. That fact should suffice, one imagines, to convince a man that letter-copying can go but a little way. Any penman can transcribe letters—or without even inking his fingers—can put them together, scissors-and-paste fashion, much quicker than any printer can put them into type.”<sup>1</sup>

William Winter remarks that “the unjustifiable use of private letters, as an element in the biography of deceased persons, has been severely and rightly condemned.” He then tells us that “a judicious and correct use of such documents, however, can neither do injustice to the dead nor give offence to the living.”<sup>2</sup> He thus leaves the problem where he found it. Every biographer must, in the end, arrive at his own solution of just what constitutes “a judicious and correct use” of private letters.

The problem of length is one which biographers of the present and the future must face unflinchingly. It is not a new problem: it has been before the public since the days of Boswell's *Johnson* and Lockhart's *Scott*. It is, however, more vital than ever before: in this day of details, when every possible scrap of information in regard to a man's life is fondly treasured, when significant are in danger of being buried beneath insignificant facts, we may well take pause. “Most modern biographies are too large,” the words are those of the Rev. Thomas Davidson—“they err by not selecting merely the significant.”<sup>3</sup> In this connexion we may well bear in mind, also, another of Mr. Davidson's thoughtful statements: “If, as has been said, every man's life is worth telling for something that there was in it of unique interest, it may be equally true that all the life save this particular part was not worth telling at all, and had

<sup>1</sup> Edwards and Hole, *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography*, pp. 24-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Old Friends*, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, article “Biography.”

better been left untold.”<sup>1</sup> Leslie Stephen deprecated the increasing length of biographies in no uncertain terms: “Lives are really becoming overpowering. Old Pusey—the smallest of human beings—has, I think, four monstrous volumes, discussing baptismal regeneration and the like. It makes one ashamed of the intellect of the race. . . . There are two volumes about Dean Stanley, principally to show that he acted as personal conductor to the Prince of Wales.”<sup>2</sup> A realisation of the full import of the problem and a proper application of well-merited ridicule may have the effect of bringing the biographies of the future within reasonable compass.

Herbert Spencer has called attention to a defect necessarily arising out of omission for purposes of compression: “A biographer or autobiographer is obliged to omit from his narrative the commonplaces of daily life, and to limit himself almost exclusively to salient events, action, and traits. The writing and the reading of the bulky volumes otherwise required would be alike impossible. But by leaving out the humdrum part of life, forming that immensely larger part which it had in common with other lives, and by setting forth only the striking things, he produces the impression that it differed from other lives more than it really did. This defect is inevitable.”<sup>3</sup> It is true that in great degree a biographer “is obliged to omit from his narrative the commonplaces of daily life”—for the simple reason that biography is an art—and it is likewise true that the defect to which Mr. Spencer calls attention is less noticeable in the works of those biographers who possess the highest artistic ability.

Turning from problems to tendencies, we may remark

<sup>1</sup> *Chambers's Encyclopædia*, article “Biography.”

<sup>2</sup> In letter (Dec. 23, 1904) to Charles Eliot Norton, quoted in Maitland's *Life of Stephen*, p. 420.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, vol. ii. pp. 326-7.

first that there is no decline in the amount of biography that is being written and published; rather, it seems to be on the increase. Life-narrative is still dividing attention well with fiction. It is pleasing to note that "a good biography has a chance amid the welter of war."<sup>1</sup> With the good, there are, of course, great numbers of worthless biographies published. We must simply submit to the output, and, as in the past, allow the worthless ones to disappear. We may, perhaps, and rightly find fault with those biographers who profess merely "to submit materials for others to work up"—professions which amount to confessions of biographical incompetence. These incompetents, however, may also be performing a service, and on their failures more skilful writers may erect successes.

Lives of the type of Johnson's *Savage* and Carlyle's *Sterling* seem to be increasing in number, although in quality few can approach these great models. Although Ruskin probably went too far in saying that "Lives in which the public are interested are scarcely ever worth writing," there is no evidence that Carlyle's statement that "a true delineation of the smallest man, and his scene of pilgrimage through life, is capable of interesting the greatest man," is in any sense exaggerated. It may not be true that the life of a comparatively insignificant, unknown person is of value only when told and interpreted by a writer of the deepest insight and greatest artistic ability; yet so much depends, in such a case, upon the interpretation that successful biographies of this type are likely to remain the scarcest in the language. Few, indeed, since Carlyle's *Sterling* have risen to the height of Charles William Eliot's brief sketch, *John Gilley, Maine Farmer and Fisherman*.

<sup>1</sup> In article "War and Books," by James Milne, literary editor of *The Daily Chronicle*, July 27, 1915.

Redivival biography continues to flourish. No pains are being spared to reproduce from the dusty records of the past some semblance of a man. In certain instances such biographies are clearly fulfilling a purpose, as, for example, in the case of Laurence Sterne, who waited almost a century for a biographer. The success of such attempts can be but approximate; it is not possible for such biographies to attain to anything like the truth and fidelity of those written by contemporaries. "Some have affected to write the lives of persons long since dead and gone, and their names preserved only by some formal remains, and (ever) dubious traditions," wrote Roger North near the middle of the eighteenth century. "So," he continues, "painters copy from obscure draughts half obliterated, whereof no member, much less the entire resemblance, is to be found. But fiction, supported upon seeming probability, must fill up the blanks and supply all defects. In this manner some lives have become redivival, but with partial views, tending either to panegyric, the advance of some favourite opinions, or factious intrigues; which are fiercely pursued, while the life-scrapes come out very thin and meagre. And, after great length of time, how should it come off better?"<sup>1</sup> Yet not for this reason should we dismiss earnest attempts to produce such narratives, or deny ourselves such information and pleasure as they may give us. There is always a place for such a scholarly effort as that recently made by Professor Charles Mills Gayley, to fashion for us from most difficult materials some semblance of the personality of Francis Beaumont.<sup>2</sup> One could scarcely set before oneself a more difficult biographical task than to distinguish clearly between Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher—to eliminate the "and" which has so long united the "heavenly twins."

<sup>1</sup> *Lives of the Norths*, vol. iii. pp. 273-4.

<sup>2</sup> In his *Beaumont the Dramatist*.

The shadowy border-land between biography and fiction was never more clearly evident than it is at the present. In autobiography, especially, is there danger of wandering too far from actual fact. The danger is, perhaps, unavoidable: for most of us the past is the land of romance, and from our experience in that golden realm all unpleasantness has disappeared, or has been, at least, softened. It is difficult to write of past experiences from the point of view of the past. Such novels as *David Copperfield* and the *Mill on the Floss* are full of personal reminiscences, and go to show how easy it is for autobiography to be turned in the direction of fiction. In his recent book, *Father and Son*, which was crowned in 1913 by the French Academy, Edmund Gosse remarks that "at the present hour, when fiction takes forms so ingenious and so specious, it is perhaps necessary to say that the . . . narrative, in all its parts, and so far as the punctilious attention of the writer has been able to keep it so, is scrupulously true." The volume has much of the charm and much of the method of fiction; it was put forth anonymously, and with the names of persons altered. The narrative constitutes a biography of the father (Philip Henry Gosse) and an autobiography of the son (Edmund) from birth to his twenty-first year. Thus, however careful Mr. Gosse has been to write what is "scrupulously true," the reader feels that over the entire narrative there hangs a veil—the blue haze of the past—and that between the story of *Father and Son* and fiction that is fashioned out of fact, there lies but a step. The book is wrought out of such stuff "as dreams are made on." In William Henry Venable's *A Buckeye Boyhood*, America has produced a somewhat similar veiled autobiography, which, though perhaps following Mr. Gosse's work at a distance, is yet worthy to be named with it. Read in connexion with such matter-of-fact works as the auto-



biographies of Franklin, Hume, and Gibbon, the tendency illustrated by such books as these of Mr. Gosse and Mr. Venable will stand forth clearly.

Mr. Gosse, in the Preface to *Father and Son*, says that the book "is offered . . . as a record of educational and religious conditions which, having passed away, will never return. In this respect, as the diagnosis of a dying Puritanism, it is hoped that the narrative will not be altogether without significance." One cannot help wondering, after reading these words, whether Mr. Gosse, during the period of writing his narrative, ever thought of a certain New England novel; for long before, in his *Doctor Johns: Being a Narrative of Certain Events in the Life of an Orthodox Minister of Connecticut*, Donald Grant Mitchell also diagnosed phases of "a dying Puritanism." There are many points of likeness between honest, fervid Doctor Johns and Philip Henry Gosse; young Reuben Johns chafed under his father's restraints as bitterly as ever Edmund Gosse did. Both books show the results—somewhat different to be sure—of an unyielding, but mistaken religious educational regime. Although it professes to be simply fiction Mr. Mitchell's novel is full of autobiographical touches. These two works should be read in conjunction by those who wish to study the manner in which fact and fiction blend in autobiography—the manner in which fact readily and easily shades into pure fiction. The one book is the complement of the other.

The long-growing tendency to avoid panegyric has been steadily strengthened and confirmed; we no longer demand idealised biography. We have grown very far away from the opinions expressed by William Wordsworth in 1816, in his letter to James Gray concerning biographies of Robert Burns. Wordsworth would have us shrink from the truth; he would have us shield the life of authors from close

inspection; he would have us accept the works as apart from the workers:

"Your feelings, I trust," writes Wordsworth to Gray, "go along with mine; and rising from this individual case [Robert Burns] to a general view of the subject, you will probably agree with me in opinion that biography, though differing in some essentials from works of fiction, is nevertheless, like them, an *art*—an art, the laws of which are determined by the imperfections of our nature, and the constitution of society. Truth is not here, as in the sciences, and in natural philosophy, to be sought without scruple, and promulgated for its own sake, upon the mere chance of its being serviceable; but only for obviously justifying purposes, moral or intellectual.

"Silence is a privilege of the grave, a right of the departed: let him, therefore, who infringes that right, by speaking publicly of, for, or against, those who cannot speak for themselves, take heed that he opens not his mouth without a sufficient sanction. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, is a rule in which these sentiments have been pushed to an extreme that proves how deeply humanity is interested in maintaining them. . . .

"The general obligation upon which I have insisted, is especially binding upon those who undertake the biography of *authors*. Assuredly, there is no cause why the lives of that class of men should be pried into with the same diligent curiosity, and laid open with the same disregard of reserve, which may sometimes be expedient in composing the history of men who have borne an active part in the world. Such thorough knowledge of the good and bad qualities of these latter, as can only be obtained by a scrutiny of their private lives, conduces to explain not only their public conduct, but that of those with whom they have acted. Nothing of this applies to authors, considered merely as authors. Our business is with their books—to understand and to enjoy them. And, of poets more especially, it is true—that, if their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished. It should seem that the ancients thought in this manner; for of the eminent Greek and Roman poets, few and scanty memorials were, I believe, ever prepared; and fewer still are preserved. It is delightful to read what, in the happy exercise of his own genius, Horace chooses to communicate of himself and his friends; but I confess I am not so much a lover of knowledge, independent of its quality, as to make it likely that it would much rejoice me, were I to hear that records of the Sabine poet and his contemporaries, composed upon the Boswellian plan, had been

unearthed among the ruins of Herculaneum. You will interpret what I am writing, *liberally*. With respect to the light which such a discovery might throw upon Roman manners, there would be reasons to desire it: but I should dread to disfigure the beautiful ideal of the memories of those illustrious persons with incongruous features, and to sully the imaginative purity of their classical works with gross and trivial recollections. The least weighty objection to heterogeneous details, is that they are mainly superfluous, and therefore an incumbrance.

"But you will perhaps accuse me of refining too much; and it is, I own, comparatively of little importance, while we are engaged in reading the *Iliad*, the *Eneid*, the tragedies of *Othello* and *King Lear*, whether the authors of those poems were good or bad men; whether they lived happily or miserably."<sup>1</sup>

While we are simply engaged in *reading* great works it may, indeed, be a matter of "comparatively little importance whether the authors were good or bad men; whether they lived happily or miserably"; but when we turn to a consideration of an author's life—in other words, when we turn to the *biography* of an author—it *is* a matter of importance that we have the truth. Biography, in short, has come to be regarded as "a truthful picture of life, of life's tangled skein, good and ill together. Biography prejudices its chances of success when it is consciously designed as an ethical guide of life."<sup>2</sup> While there is a present-day demand for truth, there is at the same time no demand that the faults of a man's life should be exaggerated: a due sense of proportion is all that is asked for.<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth speaks of the "poetic character which Burns reared on the basis of his actual character," and would have us consider this "airy fabric" alone, forgetting that branch cannot be separated from root. Wordsworth's

<sup>1</sup> *Prose Works of Wordsworth*, Edited by William Knight, vol. ii. pp. 259-77.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, *Principles of Biography*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> As a statement of one point of view, Mrs. Oliphant's article on "The Ethics of Biography," in the *Contemporary Review*, July 1883, is interesting.

method, followed to its logical conclusion, would soon result in myth; in fact he seemed to prefer that details of a poet's life should recede more and more into the mythical past.

"Now, there's Abraham Lincoln," remarked Walt Whitman one day to Horace Traubel, and his words may well be set down in contrast to those of Wordsworth—"Now, there's Abraham Lincoln: people get to know his traits, his habits of life, some of his characteristics set off in the most positive relief; soon all sorts of stories are fathered on him—some of them true, some of them apocryphal—volumes of stories (stories decent and indecent) fathered on him: legitimate stories, illegitimate: and so Lincoln comes to us more or less falsified. Yet I know that the hero is after all greater than any idealisation. Undoubtedly—just as the man is greater than his portrait—the landscape than the picture of it—the fact than anything we can know about the fact. While I accept the records I think we know very little of the actual. I often reflect, how very different every fellow must have been from the fellow we come upon in the myths—with the surroundings, the incidents, the push and pull of the concrete moment, all left out or wrongly set forth. It is hard to extract a man's real self—any man—from such a chaotic mass—from such historic débris."<sup>1</sup> Later on, Traubel records: "W. said to me to-night again as he has before: 'Some day you will be writing about me: be sure to write about me honest: whatever you do do not prettify me: include all the hells and damns.' Adding: 'I have hated so much of the biography in literature because it is so untrue: look at our national figures how they are spoiled by liars: by the people who think they can improve on God Almighty's work—who put on an extra touch here,

<sup>1</sup> *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. i. p. 108.

there, here again, there again, until the real man is no longer recognisable.”<sup>1</sup> We may safely conclude that the tendency of the present is towards the truth; that hereafter men’s faults will be set forth in proper proportion. In America, the *True Series* of biographies bears testimony to an honest—if not always successful—endeavour to write biography that is not deformed panegyric or refined myth.

The Boswell-autobiographical method has become firmly established. Its persistence in all great biography of the present is evidence that it will dominate the future. It is worth while to record that one of the most recent (1915) biographies, *The Life and Work of Edward Rowland Sill*, achieves a successful delineation of its subject, perhaps because its author, William Belmont Parker, abandoned his original design—although he had half completed his task—and, acting upon a hint expressed in Leslie Stephen’s essay on Autobiography, turned back to make the book, so far as possible, an autobiography of Sill. Modern biographies differ, of course, very much from Boswell’s model; almost all of them, as is well-nigh inevitable, contain far less of conversation. The present has produced, however, one work that approaches Boswell’s. Mr. Horace Traubel has thus far given in his *With Walt Whitman in Camden* a minute record of Whitman’s life from March 28, 1888, until January 20, 1889. The 1614 pages of this three-volume record contain an amount of conversation equalling, if not surpassing, that of Johnson’s gathered by Boswell. Mr. Traubel has not, unfortunately, written a biography of Whitman, he has merely published the record which he made day by day. “I do not want to re-shape those years,” he writes. “I want them left as they were. I keep them forever contemporary. I trust in the spontaneity of first impressions. . . . So I have let Whitman alone. I have

<sup>1</sup> *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. i. p. 398.

let him remain the chief figure in his own story. . . . I do not come to conclusions. I provide that which may lead to conclusions. I provoke conclusions.”<sup>1</sup> Thus it is that Mr. Traubel has preferred to remain a recorder rather than attempted to become a biographer.

Although problems are being faced and solutions attempted, although certain tendencies stand forth clearly, it remains true that the end of the experimental stage has not yet been reached. “The mode of treatment, especially in modern times, is far from uniform. In some cases biography approaches the sphere of philosophy; in others, that of history; while in the majority it assumes, to a large extent, the character of analytic or descriptive criticism. To none of these modes, theoretically considered, can there be any valid objection; everything depends on the judiciousness of the biographer.”<sup>2</sup> While the methods may not be uniform, the aim of biography has become fixed and definite. “The aim of biography is, in general terms, to hand down to a future age the history of individual men and women, to transmit enduringly their character and exploits. Character and exploits are for biographical purposes inseparable. Character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantasm. The exploit may range from mere talk, as in the case of Johnson, to empire-building and military conquest, as in the case of Julius Caesar or Napoleon. But character and exploit jointly constitute biographic personality. Biography aims at satisfying the commemorative instinct by exercise of its power to transmit personality.”<sup>3</sup> There is practical unanimity of belief that the biographer “must keep perpetually in view . . . the personality and characteristics of his subject. If these are buried under a load of digressive

<sup>1</sup> In his foreword, “To Readers.”

<sup>2</sup> *New International Encyclopædia*, article “Biography.”

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *Principles of Biography*, pp. 8-9.

dissertations, his book, however valuable or interesting, ceases to be a biography except in name.”<sup>1</sup>

We have no reason to deplore either the course of the best modern biography, or the tendencies of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Already we may point with pride to such works as Allen's *Life of Phillips Brooks*, Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, Palmer's *Alice Freeman Palmer*, and Cook's *Life of Ruskin*. The very length of three of these biographies impresses upon us, however, the necessity of emphasising the admonition of Sir Sidney Lee: “More than ever at the present day is there imperative need of winnowing biographic information, of dismissing the voluminous chaff while conserving the grain. . . . The biographer's labours will hereafter be immensely increased; but they will be labours lost, unless principles of discrimination be rigorously applied.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *New International Encyclopædia*, article “Biography.”

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Biography*, pp. 41-2.

## CHAPTER X

## A COMPARATIVE VIEW

To give anything like an adequate account of comparative biography would require a large volume, if, indeed, the subject could be compassed within that limit. It is no part of the task we have in hand to attempt such an ambitious survey; but we may, with profit to ourselves, review briefly the world contribution before the rise of the form in the British Islands; trace the chief influences which have affected English biographers; and glance sufficiently at the work accomplished by the leading modern nations to enable us to estimate the progress made by English biography, and thus form some opinion of its comparative rank. The value of the work accomplished by English authors in this department of literature will, as a result, become more clearly evident.

Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba* is the first authentic manifestation of the biographical impulse in Britain. Its approximate date is 690 A.D. The work of the ninth Abbot of Iona was preceded by a large body of biographical composition, written principally by Greeks and Romans. The Hebrews, indeed, produced a great deal that may be classed as biography, but the Old Testament narratives are only incidentally, not deliberately, biographical. The four Gospels constitute biographies of Jesus Christ, and much of the remainder of the New Testament, if not intentionally so, is yet autobiographical in method. If we cared to press the matter still farther back, we might add, what has often been remarked, that all ancient mythologies are but lives of



heroes and gods. The biographical instinct is thus seen to be deep-seated and ancient, carrying us back, in truth, to the very borderland of history and myth.

With the pre-historical manifestations of biography we need not concern ourselves. The attempt would be, without doubt, interesting, but hardly profitable for the purpose of this sketch. We may take up the thread of our investigation from the date of the first specimen of deliberate biography, the *Memorabilia* of Socrates, the work of Xenophon (430?-355?), dating from about 390 B.C. The *Memorabilia* is the tribute of a loyal and appreciative disciple to the memory of a great master rather than a complete biography. The work lacks artistic unity and coherence; it contains little of the history of the steps by which Socrates advanced from youth to old age; the whole forms a one-sided picture, because Xenophon confines himself chiefly to one period of Socrates' life, and to one aspect of that period—the aspect of the skilful and influential teacher. The moral and practical in the life of Socrates were the elements which appealed to Xenophon, and as a result we feel that Xenophon gives us less, just as we feel that Plato gives us more, than the true Socrates. Nevertheless, the *Memorabilia* is an excellent experiment in biography, and not without value to those who, at the present day, undertake life-writing. It is the work of one who knew his subject well; it contains much conversation, and without doubt gives us a clear notion of Socrates' method of teaching; it strikes a wise balance between undue praise on the one hand and uncharitable blame on the other; if primarily a tribute, it is fundamentally sane in its attitude. We may still study, with benefit to ourselves, this first authentic and deliberate specimen of biography.

The Greeks furnish us not only the first biography, but also, in Plutarch (46-120 A.D.), the greatest among ancient

biographers. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* are so well known, and have exerted so great an influence upon history, biography, and literature, that no further comment upon them is here necessary. The tale of Greek biographers does not, however, close with Plutarch. To Diogenes Laertius (second century) we owe the *Lives of Philosophers*, which, although thrown together without orderly arrangement, and on the whole of doubtful critical value, yet preserve information in regard to the private life-details of ancient philosophers, anecdotes of their lives, and quotations from lost works, otherwise unknown to us. In short, the work of Diogenes Laertius is our chief source for the history of Greek philosophy, and upon it all modern histories of the subject are based. Philostratus (c. 170-245) has given us the *Lives of the Sophists*, a series of "picturesque impressions" of the leaders among the so-called sophistical philosophers; and the *In Honour of Apollonius of Tyana*, a work biographical in method, but pronounced by critics to be "a philosophical and historical romance."<sup>1</sup> Olympiodorus of Alexandria (6th century) wrote in Greek a *Life of Plato*. These are the chief manifestations of the form: from them one may gain a clear notion of the theory and the practice of biography as set forth by the Greeks.

Among the Romans, the *Illustrious Men* of Cornelius Nepos (c. 99-24 B.C.) stands first in point of time. Tacitus (c. 55-120 A.D.) made an enduring contribution to separate biography in the *Life of Agricola*, published in 97 or 98 A.D. It was the purpose of Tacitus, in this work, to do honour to the memory of his father-in-law; he did not, however, allow his affection to mislead him, but wrote in a lofty tone of dignified restraint. The work may well be studied by

<sup>1</sup> See the brilliant study and translation, *Philostratus: In Honour of Apollonius of Tyana*, by Professor J. S. Phillimore, University of Glasgow. Oxford, 1912.

biographers as an example of "noblest eloquence" combined with "the most perfect good taste." Suetonius (second century) is the Roman Plutarch. His most valuable work is the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, a collection replete with information in regard to the personal lives of the Roman emperors, dealing far more with private details of their lives than with the history of their reigns. In a much slighter way, Suetonius wrote also the *Lives of Eminent Grammarians, Rhetoricians, and Poets*.

Classical biography was chiefly collective; that is, the Greek and Roman biographers produced collections of lives grouped together either because the units exhibited some common characteristic, or because the group subserved a distinctive purpose in the author's plan. Thus Suetonius grouped together as one work the *Lives of the Caesars*, just as he did the *Lives of Grammarians, Rhetoricians, and Poets*, respectively; Plutarch wrote such lives as would subserve his purpose of parallel treatment; Diogenes Laertius wrote the *Lives of Philosophers* in such a way as to develop, after his fashion, the history of philosophy, while Philostratus dealt with such as he could make subserve his plan of exhibiting what he termed the sophistic movement. Of separate biography, such as Xenophon's *Memorabilia* or Tacitus' *Life of Agricola*, there was little.

The ancients, indeed, scarcely looked upon biography as a separate and distinctive form of literature; for them, it served rather as a means of historical and ethical instruction. We are not surprised, therefore, to find that a prevailing characteristic of classical biography was its moral purpose. "Moral good," writes Plutarch in his account of Pericles, "is a practical stimulus; it is no sooner seen, than it inspires an impulse to practice; and influences the mind and character not by a mere imitation which we look at, but by the statement of the fact creates a moral

purpose which we form. And so we have thought fit to spend our time and pains in writing the lives of famous persons.”<sup>1</sup> The example set by Plutarch was far-reaching. It is only in the present that we find anything like concerted insistence on the fact that “true biography is no handmaid of ethical instruction”; that any assistance rendered by biography to ethical interests (as well as to historical and scientific interests) should be accidental; that biography “rules a domain of its own”; that it is, in short, “autonomous.”<sup>2</sup>

We should never lose sight of the fact that it was not, however, from classical models that biography in Britain received its impulse. As we have shown in Chapter I., the first important influence on English biography was that exerted during the Latin period by the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers. It seems clear, in brief, that those early attempts at life-recording were directly inspired by the literature of the Christian Church. A point worthy of careful notice in this connexion is the little influence of the Old Testament biographies with their commingling of good and bad in the chequered web of the lives they relate; with their slight tendency to panegyric. Moses, Saul, David—these men are not represented in the Old Testament narratives as impossible embodiments of unapproachable virtue and divinity: the blackest spots in their lives are revealed to us. Not thus did early British biographers write of their subjects; they chose rather to model their works after the Gospel narratives. The power of a life—the life of Jesus Christ—had entered into the world, and Christians, especially Churchmen, whose professional duty it was to point the way, were attempting to mould their lives after the Great Model. The Christian

<sup>1</sup> *Lives*, vol. i. p. 227, Dent's "Everyman's Library."

<sup>2</sup> Lee, *The Principles of Biography*, p. 18.

world of the period was in earnest, desperately in earnest, and strove with all the means known to ascetic discipline to "keep the body under" and to achieve holiness in life. Small wonder is it that the miraculous elements in both Old and New Testaments exerted a predominating influence; small wonder is it that, in their earnestness, the early Britons overemphasised the miraculous, exaggerated the holiness of their subjects, and wrote almost impossible panegyrics: they were but attempting to make of their subjects of biography, the embodiments of the ideal holy life which they were keeping before themselves, and which they considered it their duty to keep before the world. The example of such writers as St. Athanasius, in his *Life of St. Anthony*, could only confirm the tendencies of British Churchmen. To these early British biographers, the models set by pagan writers, even had their works been known, would have made little appeal. From the time of Adamnan, then, until after Izaak Walton had made his contribution to the form, classical biography exerted practically no influence in Britain. The connecting link between classical and English biography, as we have already shown, was Plutarch.

Thus, although English biography began eleven centuries later than the *Memorabilia*, the first of the classical forerunners; and although more than eight centuries elapsed after the work of Adamnan before the classical prototypes—chiefly through Plutarch—exerted any appreciable influence on the work of English biographers, we find little to regret in this seemingly slow progress. Looked upon chiefly as history; interested mostly in teaching morality, in "celebrating definite moral qualities," biography was not concerned primarily with a delineation of "individual characteristics." As Edmund Gosse points out, "the true conception of biography as the

faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life, is very modern. We may question whether it existed, save in rare and accidental instances, until the seventeenth century. . . . It was very difficult to teach the world that, whatever biography is, it is not an opportunity for panegyric or invective, and the lack of this perception destroys our faith in most of the records of personal life in ancient and mediæval times. It is impossible to avoid suspecting that Suetonius loaded his canvas with black in order to excite hatred against the Roman emperors; it is still more difficult to accept more than one page in three of the stories of professional hagiographers. As long as it was a pious merit to deform the truth, biography could not hope to flourish. It appears to have originally exerted itself when the primitive instinct of sympathy began to have free play, that is to say, not much or often before the seventeenth century. Moreover, the peculiar curiosity which legitimate biography satisfies is essentially a modern thing; and presupposes an observation of life not unduly clouded by moral passion or prejudice.”<sup>1</sup> In the light of these statements, we thus see that English biography had not long to wait before the dawn of the true conception of the type.

A statement made by Edward Phillips at the beginning of his *Life of Milton*,<sup>2</sup> in addition to giving us a contemporary estimate of English biography, also summarises for us the chief foreign influences operative down to 1694. Among those of the ancients considered by the English as “the most eminent in this way of history” he names Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, and Cornelius Nepos. Of “the moderns,” he mentions “Machiavel, a noble Florentine, who elegantly wrote the *Life of Castruchio Castracano, Lord of Luca*; Gassendus of France; and Thuanus.”

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, article “Biography.”

<sup>2</sup> Prefixed to Milton's *Letters of State*.

His list of English biographers is limited to Sir Fulke Greville; "Mr. Thomas Stanly<sup>1</sup> of Cumberlo Green, who made a most elaborate improvement on Laertius"; and Izaak Walton.

Phillips was right in giving Plutarch the foremost place, for it was the work of the Greek which formed the connecting link between classical and English biography. The *Parallel Lives* were translated into Italian by Alexander Jaconello of Riete in 1480, and into Spanish by Alfonso de Palencia in 1491; but their influence was brought to bear upon English writers chiefly through the admirable French translation published by Jacques Amyot in 1565. Happily for the work of Plutarch it found in Amyot a translator who possessed the spirit of the Greek biographer united with a gift of language that made the French version more than a bald translation. Happily, also, the translation was made when French was rising to a commanding position in world literature. It was due in no small measure to this French translation that Plutarch came to be recognised as a classic "naturalised in many countries." It may be going somewhat too far to assert that but for Amyot we should probably have had no North's *Plutarch*; but it was Amyot's version which Thomas North translated into English in 1579, when the work of the Greek first became a living influence in English literature. The lateness of its appearance in an English version indicates, in a way, the measure of its influence upon English-speaking peoples. It was the Rev. Edward Edwards who pointed out that if we speak of Englishmen at large, we must admit that Plutarch has never taken "that hold of the public mind which he took in Italy, and still more conspicuously in France. With us, the expressive phrase, 'One of the men of Plutarch,'

<sup>1</sup> Stanly was one of two to whom Phillips addressed the Preface of the *Theatrum Poetarum*.

has never passed into a proverb, as it has with our neighbours.”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Plutarch, once made accessible to the English, was carefully read and his example heeded. From Izaak Walton to James Boswell we may trace in one way or another the influence of the Greek. Moreover, we must always bear in mind the fact that Boswell appealed to the authority of Plutarch, as to “the prince of ancient biographers,” and then proceeded to write his *Life of Johnson* in such fashion as to make it bear the same resemblance to the *dicta* of Plutarch in regard to biography that a full-blown rose bears to the bud. We should likewise always bear in mind the debt which Shakespeare, through North’s translation, owes to Plutarch. Mr. Edwards, again, in an interesting way has pointed out that “the mere literary affiliation . . . falls short of the main truth. Shakespeare gives sublimity to passages which he adopts (almost to the letter) by a faculty which was his alone. But what he makes to blaze was already in a glow. Vast as is the disparity of intellect, there is unity of spirit between the Greek biographer and the English poet. Had Shakespeare”—and here we have the main point for which we quote—“Had Shakespeare set himself to write lives, he would have gone about the task, one feels sure, with impressions, as to its nature and aims, very like those which Plutarch has expressed in two famous passages of the *Life of Alexander* and of the *Life of Nicias*. Shakespeare’s regard for the ‘dignity of history’ would have been much on a par with Plutarch’s.”<sup>2</sup>

Although, as we have noticed, most ancient biographical works are collective, none of them belongs to the department of general biography; nor do we find among them

<sup>1</sup> *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography*, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 41-2.



anything resembling a dictionary of biography.<sup>1</sup> The celebrated *Lexicon* wrought out by the industry of the Greek lexicographer Suidas (c. 10th century) is an uncritical collection of grammatical, geographical, and biographical information arranged in alphabetical order, bearing some little resemblance to an historical dictionary. Its compiler refers to a source of the biographical notices, the *Onomasticon* or *Pinax* of Hesychius of Miletus, and we know that the excerpts of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the chronicle of Georgius Monachus, the biographies of Diogenes Laertius, and the works of Athanaeus and Philostratus were also drawn upon. We may feel sure, however, that no dictionary of biography, in the true sense, existed among the ancients.

The work which pointed the way for makers of biographical dictionaries may well have been the small volume compiled by Hermannus Torrentinus under the title *Elucidarius Carminum et Historiarum: vel Vocabularius Poeticus, continens Historias, Provincias, Urbes, Insulas, Fluvios, et Montes Illustres*, and printed at Hagenaw, in November 1514. In this little volume, among the alphabetical lists of provinces, cities, islands, rivers, and mountains, we find also the names of gods and illustrious men. The purpose of the compiler was to provide a companion volume for the readers of the classic poets. The descriptions of places are, for the most part, brief; a number of the biographical notices, however, are more extended, those of Medea, Oedipus, Ulysses, and Scylla occupying twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, and thirty-three lines, respectively. That the work fulfilled a need is evidenced by the fact that twenty-four editions appeared before 1537. Its influence

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Christie's suggestive article on "Biographical Dictionaries" in the *Quarterly Review* (January 1884) is, unfortunately, marred by many errors of fact.

on the French was exerted through the brothers, Robert and Charles Estienne, who published a number of reprints, enlargements, and revisions, which culminated in 1553 in Charles' Latin *Dictionarium Historicum, Geographicum, ac Poeticum*, the first French encyclopaedia. The *Dictionarium* formed the basis of a French work, Juigné-Broissinière's *Dictionnaire Theologique, Historique, Poetique, et Cosmographique*, published either in 1627 (according to the *Biographie Universelle*), or in 1644 (according to the *Nouvelle Biographie Générale*). Poor as the work seems when judged by present-day standards, it was of value in its time, and, as the only historical and biographical dictionary in the French language, it passed through at least ten editions within the next thirty years. Estienne must have received immense aid, however, from another and far greater work than that of Torrentinus. We refer to the *Bibliotheca Universalis* of Konrad Gesner (1516-65), in which the author made the attempt to produce a catalogue of "all writers living or dead, ancient or modern, learned or unlearned, published or in manuscript, but chiefly of those in the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages." The volume was published at Zurich (Tigurinus) in September 1545, in Latin,<sup>1</sup> and formed the model of all succeeding works of this biographical and bibliographical nature. Gesner made the attempt to give a summary of the contents, a critical estimate, and a specimen of the style of such writers as he could collect. A similar ambitious effort was made by Anton du Verdier de Vauprivias (1544-1600), in his *Prosopographia Universalis* (Lyons, 1573).

From the days of Estienne's *Historical Dictionary*, the French have excelled in general collections of lives pub-

<sup>1</sup> Not in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, as a number of English writers erroneously state: the title page records that the work is "*locupletissimus in tribus linguis, Latina, Graeca, et Hebraica.*"

lished along with other historical matter. In 1674 appeared Louis Moreri's *Grand Dictionnaire Historique*, a work which so completely surpassed all its predecessors that for a century it set the standard. Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1697), Jacques George de Chauffepie's *Nouveau Dictionnaire* (1750), and Prosper Marchand's *Dictionnaire Historique* (1758), were but supplements to the work of Moreri. In 1752 the Abbé L'Advocat put forth his *Dictionnaire Historique portatif des Grands Hommes*, the first work to merit the name of a general biographical dictionary. During the nineteenth century the French completed their great contribution to general biography with their deservedly famous *Biographie Universelle, Ancienne et Moderne* (1843-65) and *Nouvelle Biographie Générale* (1852-66).

The British were very early in the work of making biographical and bibliographical collections somewhat after the fashion of the works we have just been considering. John Boston, as early as the first part of the fifteenth century, in his well-meaning but bandied-about *Catalogus Scriptorum Ecclesiae* gave a list of the principal manuscripts contained in the English universities and monasteries; and, although his work never came to print in its entirety, his attempt preceded even that of Hermannus Torrentinus. John Bale's *Illustrium Majoris Britanniae Scriptorum Summarium* was the first of such British works to appear in print, in 1548. It was followed by John Pits' *De Illustribus Britanniae Scriptoribus*, printed in 1619. The work of John Leland, which preceded that of both Bale and Pits, did not reach publication until 1709. Although the English were thus early in their attempts, they confined themselves chiefly to collecting notices of their own writers, and neglected the compilation of a dictionary of general biography. In fact, while stimulated by such great efforts

as that made by the Bollandists in the preparation of the *Acta Sanctorum* (1653), and by the works of the French—the *Historical Dictionary* of Charles Estienne (of which an edition revised and enlarged by Nicholas Lloyd was published in Latin at Oxford in 1670) and the *Grand Dictionnaire* of Moreri and its supplements—the English have completed no great dictionary devoted exclusively to general biography.

The attempt to produce a great English general biographical dictionary has indeed been made, and that at a date preceding the publication of the first volume of the *Biographie Universelle*. This work, under the editorship of George Long, was undertaken by The Society for the Diffusion of Universal Knowledge, and progressed (1842-4) through the letter A in four volumes, when, owing to lack of adequate support, it was discontinued. The undertaking was without doubt too ambitious. It has been estimated that had it been completed on the scale on which it was begun, it would have extended to one hundred and fifty volumes equal in size to the four which were published. It possessed many merits, however, and in such points as the exact quotation of authorities, the careful orthography of proper names, and the dated bibliographical lists appended to the accounts of literary men, went far to aid the work of those who later produced the *Dictionary of National Biography*. We may doubt whether a general biographical dictionary will ever be produced in English on the scale of that undertaken by Mr. Long and his associates. Less need for such a work is felt since the appearance of Dr. William Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography* (1849), and Smith and Wace's *Dictionary of Christian Biography* (1877-87), works which demonstrate that English scholarship may rank with that of any other country.

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of dictionaries devoted to national biography, a department in which the English were slow in making a start. Already the Swedish dictionary (*Biografiskt Lexicon öfver Namnkunnige Svenska Män*) had been projected in 1835; the Dutch (*Biographische Woordenboek der Nederlanden*) in 1852; the Austrian (*Biographisches Lexicon des Kaiserthums Oesterreich*) in 1856; the Belgian (*Biographie Nationale de Belgique*) in 1866; and the German (*Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*) in 1875, before the English took up the work of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1885. The delay, it may be said, has been of advantage, in that the English have been able to profit by the failures and successes of those who preceded them in such labours. Leslie Stephen who began the great *Dictionary*, and Sir Sidney Lee who brought it to completion, made a most thorough study of the principles underlying the production of national biography; Mr. Lee, in particular, has succeeded in formulating these principles, and we may now read the story of the methods which have combined to make the *Dictionary of National Biography* the best work of its class produced in any language.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the early biography of the other European countries was collective. In Spain, Fernán Pérez de Guzmán (1378-1460), sometimes referred to as "the Plutarch of Spain," wrote between 1430 and 1454 his *Generaciones y Semblanzas*, a work which comprises sketches, rather than connected narratives, of thirty-four of the principal persons of his time. In Italy, the fifteenth century

<sup>1</sup> See Leslie Stephen's "National Biography" in *Studies of a Biographer*, vol. i.; Lee's "National Biography" in the *Cornhill Magazine*, March 1896, *Principles of Biography*, and "At a Journey's End" in the *Nineteenth Century and After* (December 1912); together with the prefaces, etc., of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

witnessed the rise of biography. During this century Filippo Villani (*d.* after 1404), Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421-98), and Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), wrought their collections; while in the sixteenth century Giorgio Vasari (1512-74) produced his admirable *Lives of the Artists*. German biography has little to show before the latter part of the eighteenth century. In more recent times, the output of separate biography in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany has not kept pace in quantity or quality with that of the English language. Spain has produced no work of international importance; Italy has produced much biography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but nothing of the highest excellence; Germany has plodded patiently, but with no commensurate or brilliant success. Russia is only beginning to produce biography: the biographies of her greatest poets, Pushkin (1799-1837) and Lermontov (1811-41) are yet virtually unwritten, as are those of her greatest prose writers. Biryukov's *Life of Tolstoi* perhaps represents the highest point reached thus far by Russian biography. M. René Valery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur* is typical of the most recent French lives.

In his brief essay on *Biography*, written in 1832, Carlyle somewhat despondently wrote: "May it not seem lamentable that so few genuinely good *biographies* have yet accumulated in literature; that in the whole world, one cannot find, going strictly to work, above some dozen, or baker's dozen, and these chiefly of very ancient date? Lamentable. . . . Another question might be asked: How comes it that in England we have simply one good biography, this Boswell's *Johnson*; and of good, indifferent, or even bad attempts at biography, fewer than any civilised people? Consider the French and Germans, with their Moreris, Bayles, Jördenses, Jöchers, their innumerable Memoires, and Schilderungen, and *Biographies Univer-*

*selles*; not to speak of Rousseaus, Goethes, Schubarts, Jung-Stillings: and then contrast with these our poor Birches, and Kippises, and Pecks; the whole breed of whom, moreover, is now extinct!" This wail reminds us somewhat of the cry that went up at the death of Wordsworth, the cry which proclaimed that Poetry was dead, that the Throne of Poetry was vacant, and perhaps permanently vacant. And the results in both cases have been much the same. Within four years after Carlyle had penned these words, Lockhart had commenced his *Life of Scott*; within twenty years, Carlyle himself has written the *Life of Sterling*. Within fifty years, the output of English biography, in both quantity and quality, was unexcelled. There was no longer need of calling up the names of Tom Birch, Andrew Kippis, and Francis Peck. Not only was their breed extinct, it had been succeeded by a race of giants. During the last half of the nineteenth century, no language surpassed the English in the importance and number of biographies written and published.

Already self-commemoration was an old and firmly-established custom in the world when autobiography in its first simple form appeared in the British Islands, as exemplified by the brief sketch, already mentioned, which the Venerable Bede attached to the *Ecclesiastical History of England* in 731 A.D. It is doubtless true that the simplest form of autobiography, the mere record of personal prowess and personal deeds, such as we find in Egyptian and Assyrian inscriptions, is older than the simplest form of biography. The *ego* in man seems to have developed earlier than man's appreciation of the personal worth of his fellows. Although, beyond doubt, the first manifestation of self-record long since perished, we may be sure that

centuries before anything that can be called European civilisation appeared the habit of self-commemoration was old, just as the form and habit of biography was old long before the time of Plutarch. Tacitus, in the introductory paragraphs of his *Life of Agricola*, not only refers to biography as "an ancient practice," but also affirms what convinces us that the element of apology so prominent in autobiography is likewise of ancient origin; namely, that "in days gone by . . . many thought that to write their own lives showed the confidence of integrity, rather than presumption," and assures us that "no one doubted the honesty or questioned the motives" of Rutilius and Scaurus in writing their autobiographies. Little as we know definitely, and few as are the authentic autobiographical documents remaining to us from the earliest historical ages, we yet know enough to convince us of the undoubted antiquity of self-commemoration, and of the comparative lateness of its appearance in Britain.

At the outset of an historical survey, we must bear in mind that autobiography exists in two forms: the one a record of mere objective events; the other a record of subjective processes—a history of the development of the inner life, what we may call autobiography *par excellence*. The objective is the primitive form, the form which takes us back to the borderland of history, and which persists even down to the present time. The subjective form is comparatively modern, its first appearance dating well within the earliest centuries of the Christian era. Late as the subjective form was in appearing, it has surpassed the older form in both completeness of development and intrinsic worth. We are agreed to-day that autobiography should be something more than mere impersonal objective narrative of domestic or political events. We are insisting more and more that it should be self-study, a history of the



development of the soul; we are coming to recognise that the autobiography which is worth the name is serious and truthful self-study. To such serious and truthful documents psychologists are beginning to turn for material. We may therefore dismiss the great majority of early, objective self-records as only rude attempts, first sketches, feelings after the proper form. We are safe in concluding that the history of autobiography begins with the Christian era. "We cannot insist too strongly that autobiography as we know it, and in its full sense, does not exist before Christ. . . . The great religious reformers before Christ contain detached passages and religious moods of great subjectivity, as all religious leaders must. But never, in any consecutive manner, does Plato, or Confucius, or Buddha, or any leader or reformer before Jesus Christ suggest that what a man *is*, is more important than what he *does*; or that duty obliges him to study himself with care and candour, that by such study he may assist other blind creatures like himself." <sup>1</sup>

This origin of really important autobiography well within authentic historical limits makes the history of its development not difficult to trace. The continuity of influence exerted by the works of autobiographers of the first rank is practically unbroken. "One man writes of himself because another writes; personal impressions are repeated in a practically unbroken chain. Few, if any, important autobiographies have been lost, and this is, in itself, an illuminating circumstance. With the exception of Sulla's *Commentaries*, whose effect upon Caesar was noted by his contemporaries, the capital autobiography has survived, and preserved its fresh effect on later minds, more than any other type of literary work." <sup>2</sup>

The history of autobiography carries us back directly to

<sup>1</sup> Burr, *The Autobiography*, pp. 31-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

three great names, Caesar, Augustine, and Jerome Cardan. The powerful influence exerted by the self-records of these men has left its impress upon all succeeding autobiographical documents. Caesar's *Commentaries* belongs, of course, to the objective form; in truth, at the present time the third-person narrative of the Roman would scarcely be classed as autobiography. Whatever we may think of the *Commentaries* to-day, however, we must admit, after due investigation, that this work has "inspired later autobiography to an extent almost incalculable." The influence of Caesar's work is easily and directly traceable. Mrs. Burr quotes the statement of Monluc, "*Ce grand capitaine, qui est César, m'en montre le chemin,*" and then affirms that Monluc is "but one of hundreds to whom the Roman has shown the road," and that "it is hard to find a single objective historical record for eight hundred years which does not avow that its inspiration came from Caesar's *Commentaries*."<sup>1</sup>

We have already remarked that the history of subjective autobiography begins with the Christian era. It is in keeping with the progress of human thought that, of the two forms in which such subjective narrative manifests itself—the religious and the scientific—the religious came first. In the *Confessions* of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430 A.D.), we have the beginning of complex, subjective autobiography actuated by religious emotion. We may dismiss the criticism which refers to it as only "a praise and confession of God's unmerited goodness." It is this, to be sure; but it is far more. In the history of confession it remains a most important document, introducing as it did "to the confession proper the autobiographical intention and idea." The narrative follows a

<sup>1</sup> Burr, *The Autobiography*, pp. 74-5. See also the reference to Caesar in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Hill's edition, vol. iii. p. 195.

definitely formulated plan of self-study: it includes the complete history of the subject, the sources of his sin, and the progress of his conversion-process. "Augustine not only taught this self-study to be full and sincere, but furnished an imperishable classic by way of example, and one which was to be followed by the most enthusiastic imitation. Through him, the religious record became the natural means of expression for the emotions of the middle ages."<sup>1</sup> Sainte-Beuve has pointed out the fact that down to modern times, Augustine has exerted an influence over all types of the creative religious mind; that he was, in fact, "a great empire divided among distinguished heirs."<sup>2</sup> When Petrarch, "the first of modern men," on the top of Mont Ventoux opened his copy of the *Confessions* and fixed his eyes upon those words in which Augustine says that "men wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of stars, but themselves they consider not," he awoke to the fact "that nothing is wonderful but the soul;" and forthwith began "to turn his inward eye upon himself." In that passage of one of his familiar letters<sup>3</sup> where Petrarch describes this experience, Mrs. Burr says, "the world may almost be said to come of age; the mind of man, if we permit Petrarch to personify it for us, attains maturity."<sup>4</sup> Of such monu-

<sup>1</sup> Burr, *Religious Confessions and Confessants*, pp. 42-3. See also the references to Augustine in Mrs. Burr's *The Autobiography*; in Windelband's *Geschichte der Philosophie*; and C. A. Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal*.

<sup>2</sup> "Saint Augustin est comme ces grands empires qui ne se transmettent à des héritiers même illustrés qu'en se divinant. M. de Saint-Cyran, Bossuet et Fenelon (on y joindrait aussi sous de certains aspects Malebranche) peuvent être dits, au dix-septième siècle, d'admirables demembrements de saint Augustin."—Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal*, vol. i. p. 421.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson and Rolfe, *Francesco Petrarca*, pp. 309-18.

<sup>4</sup> *Religious Confessions and Confessants*, p. 38.

mental significance in the history of autobiography is the work of Augustine.

The second or scientific type of subjective autobiography did not appear until the sixteenth century, when, in 1575, Jerome Cardan wrote his *De Vita Propria Liber*. From the psychological point of view this book is noteworthy, marking as it does the beginning of a new era in thought. Mrs. Burr points out to us that during the 1145 years lying between the death of Augustine in 430, and 1575, "there is absolutely no trace of scientific self-study," and reminds us that this fact should help us to realise "what a wholly fresh idea came to the Italian physician when he set about examining himself 'as if he were a new species of animal which he never expected to see again.'" She thus feels justified in referring to the book as one "of perfect originality," a work that "contains psychological data which have awaited the birth and development of a special branch of science for their elucidation," and further asserts that "it is not too much to say that by reason of his invention of the principle of gathering and collecting personal data, Jerome Cardan stands in the same relation to the new psychology as Galileo to astronomy. . . . He is among the first manifestations of what we term the scientific spirit; he is in the forefront of that new order which was to change the face of the universe."<sup>1</sup>

From this psychological or subjective point of view English autobiography was slow of development. Both Italy and France had contributed largely to the literature of autobiography long before anything of great value had appeared in English. At the time of Richard Vennar, whose *Apology* is an insignificant bit of merely objective record, Cardan and Benvenuto Cellini were writing in Italy; Monluc, Marguerite de Valois, and the Chroniclers were

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography*, pp. 82-5.

flourishing in France. Important subjective autobiography in English dates from comparatively modern times. True to the general world-trend of the form, the work of George Fox (1624-91), the "first capital English self-delineator," was the result of religious emotion. Lord Herbert of Cherbury, whose self-narrative may be mentioned along with that of Fox, was likewise interested in religious questions, asserting strangely enough that he published his *De Veritate*, a work hostile to Christianity, in obedience to a voice from heaven which spoke to him in broad daylight. The subjective autobiography developed but slowly, however; from Fox to Gibbon there is, in English literature, a noticeable deficiency of such documents. The opening chapter of Edmund Calamy's *An Historical Account of my Own Life* shows that, during this interval, there was no lack of interest in autobiography on the part of educated Englishmen. In this chapter Calamy enumerates and discusses practically every important self-narrative written prior to 1731. It was not, therefore, that interest was lacking, but rather that no vital modern document of general appeal had yet been written; no stimulating intellectual movement had begun. Such a document, such a movement, came soon after Calamy had written the last pages of the *Historical Account*. The *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau spoke to men just as the storm of the French Revolution was gathering. Both book and Revolution stirred England profoundly: the soil of men's minds was ready for the seed. Without doubt, the strongest direct foreign influence on English autobiography was that exerted by Rousseau. Self-record as a fashion in England followed as a result of the stimulating quality of the *Confessions*. Soon Edward Gibbon, David Hume, and Benjamin Franklin were writing the narratives that were in their turn to inspire a large body of other such documents. It was

now that English autobiography began to rise towards its zenith.

So great has been Rousseau's influence that English critics have been to a certain extent misled into referring to him as the first autobiographer of any consequence. "They invariably refer to him as the parent of the whole introspective crew," writes Mrs. Burr. In this connexion, Leslie Stephen's remarks may be quoted as typical: Mr. Stephen writes that "the prince of all autobiographers in the full sense of the word—the man who represents the genuine type in its fullest realisation—is undoubtedly Rousseau . . . the type of all autobiographers; and for the obvious reason that no man ever turned himself inside out for the inspection of posterity so completely."<sup>1</sup> Rousseau, indeed, ignorantly or with deliberate intention, would have us believe that he was an innovator; that he was undertaking a task not only without precedent, but beyond successful imitation.<sup>2</sup> We know to-day, however, that the *Confessions* only gave fresh stimulus and new life to the old movement successively contributed to by Caesar, Augustine, and Cardan; that, in particular, the work but continued the scientific method begun by Cardan. We know that Rousseau scarcely surpasses, if he does surpass, the completeness with which Cardan "turned himself inside out for the inspection of posterity." We need not for these reasons disparage the work which he did; for, notwithstanding the fact that it was but a manifestation of an old movement, it yet furnished the fresh and vital inspiration to England, where subjective autobiography had been limited to the religious type. It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that Rousseau, as a scientific subjective

<sup>1</sup> *Hours in a Library*, vol. iii. pp. 242–51.

<sup>2</sup> "Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et qui n'aura point d'imitateur," are the words which form the opening sentence of the *Confessions*.

autobiographer, was but a follower in a work in which Jerome Cardan was the great pioneer.

Rousseau's *Confessions*, therefore, while the immediate stimulus to English autobiographers, came merely as a continuation of the Cardan method. The influence of Cardan must not, however, be thought of as only a secondary influence, exerted largely or only through the medium of Rousseau; it was also a direct influence, and it is written largely upon English as upon all other autobiography. In Italy, Alfieri and Vico; in France, George Sand and Rousseau; in England, Edward Gibbon and David Hume, followed the Cardan method. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such men as Huet, Robert Burton, and Sir Thomas Browne referred to the *De Vita Propria Liber* "as among the great intellectual influences of their lives." As the dominance of the Latin language declined in England, the great book of Cardan was well-nigh forgotten, and ceased to exert its former, direct influence. The disciples of the Italian physician, however, whether they came under his influence at first hand or at second, have been intellectual leaders. It is important for us to remember that "the entire group of modern English scientists write their lives in the scientific or Cardan manner"; that Herbert Spencer, whose *Autobiography* forms "the culminating achievement of scientific self-delineation," gives as his reason for writing substantially the same as that given by Cardan. It is a matter of regret that there is as yet no English translation of so important a work.<sup>1</sup>

The Italians have produced the greatest number of important autobiographies of the subjective type. Those

<sup>1</sup> It is to be hoped that Mrs. Burr, who has already done so much to point out the value of Cardan's work, will give us an English version of the *De Vita Propria Liber*.

of Alfieri, Goldoni, Querini, Cardan, and Cellini, together with "the marvellously perfect fragments" of Lorenzino de Medici, Vico, Chiabrera, Leopardi, Petrarch, and Giusti, bear witness to the extent and value of the Italian contribution to documents of high psychological importance. Mrs. Burr finds that "the crowning glory" of the Italian autobiographer consists in "his ability to distinguish between emotion, sentiment, and fact." She calls our attention to the fact that a reader is never left in doubt as to what Benvenuto Cellini was *doing*, as apart from what he was *feeling*; that Cardan carefully differentiates his fear, affectation, and superstition from his acts, opinions, and accomplishment; that in Alfieri's struggle for self-control he does not confuse what actually happened, what people thought, and what Alfieri thought. "This extraordinary combination of high capacity and emotion with a scientific method," writes Mrs. Burr in conclusion, "is not to be found in other literatures to anything like the same degree."<sup>1</sup>

The French have produced autobiographies in far greater number and variety than have the Italians. It is to France that we must turn for the first self-narrative written by a woman, the work of Marguerite de Valois (*d.* 1549). The value of the French contribution lies rather in the literary quality of the work produced than in the important psychological element; from the beginning the French memoir has been "a literary creation rather than a scientific document." French minds seem to be adapted to self-study; they are "turned inward upon personalities—theirs is the *aspect conscient*." In this fact Mrs. Burr finds one of the reasons why French autobiography surpasses the English.

While the Germans have produced much autobiography, they have given us nothing of worth from the psychological

<sup>1</sup> *The Autobiography*, pp. 198-9.



point of view. Mrs. Burr devotes no section of *The Autobiography* to the German contribution, for the reason that she found it "psychologically valueless." In her opinion, the chief cause of that partial or defective sincerity which leads to a lower value in any autobiography is the sentimental point of view; and this "mental habit of confusing fact with sentiment" pervades German autobiographies. Whether we take up the self-narratives of Richter, Kotzebue, Stilling, Lavater, Karoline Bauer, or George Ebers, or those of Hans Andersen and Louis Holberg, we find the same defect. It is not that the works are uninteresting, or, in their way, uninteresting; it is rather that "sentiment, the sentimental attitude towards what concerns oneself, hangs like a hazy cloud over the narrative, obscuring facts, distorting experience." It is when we compare German autobiographies with those of Italy and France, that we realise the defect to the full. "The emotion which was heightened to passion in Italy, and clipped, drilled, formalised to a cult of sentiment in France, has spread over the German pages a smudge of sentimentality, besmearing, hiding, all it touches."<sup>1</sup>

Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, as by far the greatest of German autobiographies, exemplifies the failure most clearly. George Henry Lewes, while admitting that the work has charm, remarks that it is "scarcely, if at all, the kind which belongs to autobiography"; he pronounces it only an "approximation to autobiography," in that it lacks "the precise detail, and above all the direct eloquent egotism which constitutes the value and the interest of such works." In writing Goethe's *Life*, Lewes says that he found the *Dichtung und Wahrheit* as much of a stumbling-block as a stepping-stone. "The main reason for this," he asserts, "was the abiding inaccuracy of *tone*, which, far

<sup>1</sup> Burr, *The Autobiography*, pp. 207-8.

more misleading than the many inaccuracies of *fact*, gives to the whole youthful period, as narrated by him, an aspect so directly contrary to what is given by contemporary evidence, especially his own letters, that an attempt to reconcile the contradiction is futile . . . the tone of the autobiography, wherein the old man depicts the youth as the old man saw him, not as the youth felt and lived. The picture of youthful follies and youthful passions come softened through the distant avenue of years. The turbulence of a youth of genius is not indeed quite forgotten, but it is hinted with stately reserve. Jupiter serenely throned upon Olympus forgets that he was once a rebel with the Titans.”<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Burr has no hesitancy in pronouncing it “the weakest autobiography the world has ever had from so strong a hand,” and affirms that “enthusiasts over it are almost invariably to be found among those persons who think a sincere self-revelation pernicious and undesirable.”<sup>2</sup>

One rises from a comparative study of biography with a feeling of admiration for the work accomplished by English authors, and with an enduring conviction that the accomplishment of the past is but an earnest of the future. The writers of biography in English have succeeded better than those in any other language in approximating the ideal of portraying faithfully the development of a soul. The language that has produced Walton's *Lives*, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, Froude's *Life of Carlyle*, and Allen's *Life of Phillips Brooks*, together with the autobiographies of Franklin, Hume, Gibbon, Mill, Ruskin, Spencer,

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Goethe*, Preface (Second Edition).

<sup>2</sup> *The Autobiography*, pp. 68-9.

and Mrs. Oliphant, may well invite the closest comparative inspection. To be sure, English biographers have profited by close study of the biography of other nations, especially by a study of the classic examples; they are and have been glad to be "the heirs of all the ages." It nevertheless remains true that whatever they have seen fit to borrow, they have amplified and improved. They found the biographical literature of the world meagre and undeveloped; they left it, largely as a result of their own labour and example, rich and full.

## CHAPTER XI

## ENGLISH BIOGRAPHY AS LITERATURE

MANY definitions of literature have been attempted; but, like many another term in common use, the word is not only difficult, it is well-nigh impossible, to define. We may, however, accept a definition which, if not logically perfect, is yet suggestive. Let us say that literature is the record of the best thought of a race expressed in such artistic form as to inspire and elevate the soul. In this sense, the mere record of positive knowledge does not constitute literature. There is a mystic borderland where mere expression of thought merges into the pure gold of literature; we recognise the result if we cannot analyse the process. We recognise beneath all true literature the tremendous, yet subtle and restrained, force of imagination; we recognise the qualities of beauty and of power; beauty that is not mere external ornament, but a part of the substance; power that is dependent not on any one element, but upon a union of all. If we think of literature as necessarily founded upon imagination, as possessing these qualities of beauty of form and expression resulting in the power to inspire and elevate humanity, then English biography from its earliest dawn must be classed as literature in ever-increasing measure.

Its development as a department of letters was greatly retarded, of course, by its being considered only a branch of history. It was long kept out of its true kingdom. A hand-maiden to both history and literature, its own peculiar virtues were for many years overlooked and neglected.

Biography did not fully assert its independence until the last years of the eighteenth century. It is only in recent times that histories of literature have recognised the claims of biography to equal rank with other forms of prose. We have accepted the poetry and the prose of English authors, and have been content to consult biographies for the details of their lives; we have looked upon these life-records, in the main, as mere storehouses of information. We have scarcely deigned to acknowledge that these same biographies may also be literature of a high order.

The literary value of much biography has been marred by a too great insistence upon the ethical purpose. It is the old defect, a defect as old, at least, as Plutarch. From the time of Adamnan to the middle of the nineteenth century, and even later, English biography has been made to serve an ethical purpose. There has been far too much insistence by writers of the form upon the fact that "biography conveys useful instruction"; that "it sets before us the lives of eminent men, that we may imitate their virtues or avoid their vices."<sup>1</sup> The mental habit of considering biography in this light has led on the one hand to the production of fulsome panegyric; on the other, to malicious diatribe. So long as biography is looked upon simply as a medium through which to convey "useful information" for the sake of ethics, so long is it kept from its own true mission. Biography must be allowed to stand or fall of itself. Let it but relate faithfully the history of a human soul, without any warping of the truth for purposes either of panegyric or invective; let it but place before us a true narrative, without any straining for effect or any drawing of a moral, and it will not fail to speak to us clearly and influence us powerfully. "If my portrait of her is correct," writes George Herbert Palmer in his *Life of Alice*

<sup>1</sup> Burdy, *Life of Skelton*, p. 9, Oxford edition.

*Freeman Palmer*, "invigoration will go forth from it and disheartened souls be cheered."<sup>1</sup> It was chiefly because Mr. Palmer recognised that such a result was secondary to the main purpose that he achieved success. Great poems do not labour to draw morals, although they contain morals. All works of art are shorn of their power when men attempt to reduce them to slavery rather than allow them to assert their sovereignty. Works of art cease to be works of art when they carry about upon them the chains of any tyrannical influence. A work of art must be as free and sovereign as the Truth, of which, indeed, it is but a part and a manifestation. At last, men are beginning to write biographies which are works of art, constructed according to truthful principles—biographies that speak the truth, not glossing over a fault lest morality may be outraged; nor enlarging upon a virtue in order to inculcate some "useful" lesson; nor yet magnifying a sin in order to make vice hideous. Without question, such biographies will be "fruitful in lessons, stimulants to a noble ambition, the armouries wherein are gathered the weapons with which great battles are fought";<sup>2</sup> and they will be such because they relate truthfully what men have been and what they have done; and consequently such narratives will thrill the soul of every true man and woman. At the same time, such biographies will attain unto the full rank of literature.

From the beginning, we have said, English biography has been worthy, at least in part, to be classed as literature. In the long period extending from 690 to the discontinuance on the one hand of English biography written in Latin, and, on the other, of biography as exemplified by saints' lives, we find much that deserves the name of literature. The whole of the last chapter of Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba* lingers in our minds like the softened strains of a great

<sup>1</sup> P. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Lewes, *Life of Goethe*, p. 1.

cathedral organ. The Venerable Bede's account of St. Cuthbert's death, together with many passages in the *Lives of the Abbots of the Monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, strike similar responsive chords in our hearts. In Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid* we catch the power of a strong and turbulent soul, undaunted by assemblies or kings; in the *Magna Vita* of St. Hugh we feel the different power of a humbler, gentler life. The stories of Anselm and of Becket reveal to us the sweet humanity of a consecrated life and the dauntless courage of a steadfast purpose. The narratives just named are the greater types of a numerous class which contains many passages that cause us to glow with admiration for the bravery and devotion of early churchmen; that humble our pride as we learn of the humility of the great; that come to us out of the past as trumpet calls to duty. They are written in a foreign tongue, but not even the garb of a Latin idiom none too well expressed can conceal the beauty of the thought. These passages stand one sure test of great literature—the test of translation. From the tomb of mediaeval Latinity to a modern English resurrection, their beauty arises undimmed. Nor must we forget all the wealth of quaintness and humour and whimsicality with which the English verse lives about.

At first thought, we should scarcely expect to find a literary quality in the works of the antiquarians and compilers. We are not accustomed to thinking of alphabetical and chronological compilations in terms of literature. Yet not even during this prosaic period of biographical development could the English genius be entirely eclipsed. It may be that the searcher needs to carry with him a strongly expectant and unusually sympathetic spirit to find the pearls; at any rate, the pearls are there. One is repaid for turning through the dusty Latin pages even of Leland, Bale, Pits, and their successors. Now and then one chances

upon such narratives as Thomas Dempster has written of himself. The reward is increasingly greater as one turns to Anthony Wood and Thomas Fuller. In all of these industrious mortals there are occasional touches of originality; flashes of humour; displays of primitive emotion—religious and race hatred, superstition, blind fear; there are records of beliefs now discarded. That strong current of humanity, which like a mighty subterranean river runs beneath the lives of all men—even of antiquarians and compilers, who are usually considered the most “dry-as-dust” of mortals—could not be entirely suppressed. It is most clearly evident, in its best form, in the biographical works of Thomas Fuller. The *Abel Redevivus* and the *Worthies* will never disappoint, if one only approaches them in the right mood; nor need any of the others which occupy the same shelf. There is a place in the great biographical firmament even for the least of these names. May we not adapt the words of “Master Quarles, father or son,” and say that, if not as great lights, at least as small ones, the antiquarians and compilers may

“fairly shine  
Within this Skie of lustrious Starres”;

and that even if their shining is dim and uncertain it is also true that

“Thus, O thus oft Sol’s rayes most rare,  
With duskie clouds eclipsed are?”<sup>1</sup>

After the beginning of biography written in the English language and before the publication of Boswell’s *Johnson* there were produced a number of works—not many to be sure—which are entitled to rank as almost pure literature; that is, they have in themselves a literary quality of such value as to make them contributions to literature, as great as are the facts which they contain to literary history.

<sup>1</sup> From verses on Berengarius in *Abel Redevivus*, pp. 7–8.



Their rank as literature, in short, is well-nigh independent of their worth as historical documents.<sup>1</sup> Such narratives as Roper's *More*, Cavendish's *Wolsey*, the five of Walton's *Lives*, John Evelyn's *Life of Margaret Godolphin*, Goldsmith's biographical sketches, and most of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, belong to this class. These examples show what was true of English biography as literature until Boswell's day, that the literary quality was due rather to the writer of the narrative than to the kind of materials with which he worked. We can call no one of the works just enumerated an authoritative, complete biography wrought from full and exhaustive materials—materials of great literary excellence upon which the author leaned heavily. Most of them belong to the incomplete sketch type. All of them, however, bear the unmistakable stamp of personality—the personality of the writer. They are great literary productions because their authors possessed great literary ability. In any lesser hands they would have been dull and commonplace; we might value them for the facts which they contain, but we should never cherish them

<sup>1</sup> In this connexion Edward Dowden's excellent words must not be omitted: "There are two kinds of written lives of men which deserve to remain amongst us as enduring and faithful monuments. There is the rare and fortunate work of genius; this in its origin is related to imagination and creative power as closely as to judgment and observation; we can hardly pronounce whether it be the child of Memory, or of her daughters, the Muses, for it is at once a perfect work of art and an infallible piece of history. It portrays the man, in few lines or many, but in lines each one indispensable and each characteristic; it may seem to tell little, yet in fact it tells all; from such a biographer no secrets are withholden, nor does he need many diaries, letters, and reminiscences of friends; he knows as much about the man he undertakes to speak of as Shakespeare knew about Hamlet, or Titian about his magnificoes—that is, everything. Mr. Carlyle's *Life of Sterling* was perhaps the last volume placed on the narrow shelf containing the biographies in all languages which belong to this class. But there is also what we could ill lose, the work of knowledge, and labour, and patience, and zeal, and studious discrimination, and enforced impartiality."—*Studies in Literature* (first series), p. 159.

for the genius which they reflect. Works of this high quality are few, since there are few who are capable of producing them. Present-day methods of biography, moreover, make less demand upon the sheer literary skill of the biographer; to-day a large part—in most cases by far the larger part—of the material used is furnished by the subject of the narrative; in consequence, the literary skill demanded in the production of a *Life* is less the skill of unbroken narrative, and more the skill of artistic construction, of selection and rejection, of judgment and taste.

Boswell it was who firmly established the custom of using the letters and all other available documents of the subject of biography. With the admission of these documents came the shifting of the burden of responsibility for the literary quality: the biographer was no longer entirely dependent upon himself; he could now turn to the materials left by the subject—to letters, diaries, reminiscences, fragments of autobiography—and by subjecting these to a rigid selective examination, could from them construct an artistic whole. Letters especially have gone far to add to the literary quality of most great biographies; in themselves one of the oldest forms of literature, they have never failed when chosen with taste and judgment to add their own rare flavour to life-narrative. Notwithstanding the importance of documents, they endanger the very quality which they most improve: they make great demands upon the skill of the biographer. What might easily have been a work of art is frequently allowed to degenerate into a mere hodge-podge. "The mere collocation of all documents" does not result in a finished literary product. It is possible, therefore, as frequent failures bear witness, for rich materials in the hands of an unskilful biographer to yield poor results. To work with materials of great literary value a biographer

need not necessarily be a facile composer; he does need, however, to be a man of most discriminating judgment—he must be able to recognise literature when he encounters it, and must have the power to select and arrange with the utmost skill. Lockhart's *Scott*, Froude's *Carlyle*, Trevelyan's *Macaulay*, and Allen's *Phillips Brooks*, to name only a few, are examples wherein the literary quality of the documents left by the subjects has been accentuated by the skill of the biographer. Such typical works as Carlyle's *Sterling*, Eliot's *John Gilley* (although but a brief sketch), and Palmer's *Alice Freeman Palmer* help us to see, on the other hand, the extent to which the literary quality is due almost wholly to the biographer. The history of English biography shows that there are almost as few great biographers with literary judgment and architectonic skill as there are of those great because they possess in themselves the power to produce literature redolent of their own commanding personalities.

Thus we do not have many names to match with those of Roper, Cavendish, Walton, Evelyn, Goldsmith, and Johnson. To keep them company we may select from those no longer living the names of Boswell, Lockhart, Stanley, Lewes, Froude, and Allen; of others there are none worthy to move in the same company. A host of writers who have tried to perpetuate the memory of some little known person demonstrate the great powers necessary for success in such undertakings. Since the publication of the *Life of Sterling*, George Herbert Palmer's *Life of Alice Freeman Palmer* is almost the only biography entirely worthy of a place upon the shelf next to Carlyle's great work. We are best able to appreciate the literary quality of Boswell, Lockhart, and Froude when we compare them with lesser works constructed from materials left by the subjects of biography. Hayley and Moore, for example, each working

with the best of literary materials, help us to appreciate not only how easy it is to miss the way, but how great is the triumph when the way has been followed to success.

There is nothing whatever remarkable about the fact that there are few biographies in the English language of high literary quality. In common with all other forms of literature, the highest excellence in this particular form is rare. In common, too, with all other forms, even the best biography is not all good, but is good only in parts. These parts have increased in number as the entire body of English literature has widened and deepened. Particularly has the literary quality of biography increased as English prose style has developed. We have only to examine the body of biography produced before Johnson and Goldsmith and that produced after them to convince ourselves of this. The style of most biographies written before 1740 is unattractive; one derives little pleasure from the mere act of reading. After Johnson and Goldsmith made their contribution, the style yields pleasure. To-day, although biographies are written rapidly, and the output militates against high literary excellence, few of them are difficult to read; the style of the best is uniformly good.

The literary quality of autobiography quite naturally depends entirely upon the writer. The entire production, in substance, form, tone, and style, is woven out of the inner consciousness of the autobiographer. The charm and beauty of this form, therefore, is most evident when a great mind freely and unaffectedly unfolds itself. For this reason, the great bulk of mere objective autobiography is almost wholly lacking in literary excellence. Such excellence pervades the great subjective records; we find it in greater or less degree in the self-narratives of Gibbon, Hume, Franklin, Brydges, De Quincey, Mill, Ruskin, Mrs. Oliphant, Lucy Larcom, and many others. We find it less common in the

purely scientific autobiographies such as those of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Alfred Russel Wallace.

It is perhaps true that the increasing tendency of English biography towards great length is lessening the literary quality. Of course, there is "a glory of the long and a glory of the short"; but, other things being equal, it is usually more difficult to produce an excellent short work than an excellent long one. The short work demands the exercise of sound judgment, cultivated taste, relentless rejection of all that is not absolutely indispensable. It requires that the writer shall assimilate his material; that he shall know much and know it well, in order that he may tell the little which contains the essence of all. Such a work has all the strength and simplicity of a Greek temple: everything is in proportion; there is not a superfluous feature; there is the beauty of straight-line effects. The long biography, on the other hand, although now and then wrought with similar skill, usually impresses us by its very size. Its effect upon us is not unlike that of a great cathedral. We are overpowered by its vastness, by the multitude of its chapels, oratories, naves, and aisles; we carry away from it a confused sense of towers and flying buttresses and pinnacles and gargoyles and the dim lights of splendidly coloured windows. We know that it is magnificent; but its very magnificence overwhelms us. A part of its greatness is rather the greatness of size than of art. Such, in a way, is Lockhart's *Life of Scott*. It may be that a man of Sir Walter's mould requires a long and elaborate biography, just as he seems to have required great monuments. His power of production was so unlimited; his romances so lavishly wrought; his Abbotsford home so spacious and magnificent; his entire life so full and bounding, that only a canvas of ample dimensions could contain all the details; only a Gothic cathedral could compass the spirit. Even

admitting all this, it is difficult to see how the inclusion of extracts from legal debates, fragments of imperfect or discarded poetry, or the full text of letters only a part of which are to the point, add to the literary excellence of such a work. The danger of great length, of great size, is the danger of sacrificing the significant for the insignificant, of hiding the truly characteristic beneath a multitude of details. The two, three, four volume biography savours too much of German prolixity. English literature is none too rich in complete, authoritative biographies of moderate length.

It is, to be sure, difficult to compare great works. Walton, Johnson, Goldsmith, Boswell, Lockhart, Carlyle, and Froude are, each in his own way, excellent biographers: each has made a lasting contribution to English literature in the department of biography. From the work of such artists we may learn something of the qualities which go to make biography rank as literature. An examination of their works reveals that in essential features all are similar. Fundamentally, they are marked by simplicity, straightforwardness, unaffectedness. The purpose of the authors, in each case, has been to put before us such semblance of a man as they have been able to construct from the materials of which they were possessed. They have kept steadily before themselves the one aim of unfolding a unified narrative, and to this aim all others have been subordinated. It is evident that style with them has been a secondary consideration; they have attained excellence as a result of the spirit in which they have wrought: in keeping before themselves a clear and definite purpose, and in working out this purpose with straightforward, unaffected precision, they have secured the ideal of style—a manner of expression perfectly adapted to the matter in hand. There is no indication that any one of these writers has endeavoured

to display his own personal cleverness. Most of them were possessed of a large-hearted humanity; most of them understood the frailties of human nature; most of them were charitable; all strove to be scrupulously honest. In the presence of the deepest human emotions they were reserved. Great literature is founded upon strong feeling, upon large-hearted humanity: it is marked by simplicity, straightforwardness, unaffectedness, clarity, reserve, truth. The best of our English biography is marked by these qualities; always, in examining masterpieces, we find that the superficial differences of method followed by individual biographers do not blur the similarity of the underlying principles. There is an abiding unity beneath all the manifest diversity.

We may glance briefly at the manner in which three English writers have described the deaths of their subjects. These extracts may stand as typical of the best work achieved by biographers in the description of an event that easily lends itself to the display of false sentiment on the one hand, or of mere rhetoric on the other. Herein we may find simplicity, emotion, reserve. The first is from Fulke Greville's *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*; it is the best portion of the work, and exhibits the manner in which strong emotion, breaking the bonds of a fettering prose style, clothes itself in fitting and stately language. Lord Brooke has been describing the battle before Zutphen; in continuing he tells us how

“. . . an unfortunate hand out of those fore-spoken trenches brake the bone of Sir Philip's thigh with a musket shot. The horse he rode upon, was rather furiouslie chollerick, than bravely proud, and so forced him to forsake the field, but not his back, as the noblest and fittest biere to carry a martiall commander to his grave. In which sad progress, passing along by the rest of the army, where his uncle the general was, and being thirsty with excess of bleeding, he called for drink, which was presently brought him; but as he was

putting the bottle to his mouth, he saw a poor souldier carryed along, who had eaten his last at the same feast, gastly casting up his eyes at the same bottle. Which Sir Philip perceiving, took it from his head before he drank, and delivered it to the poor man, with these words, 'Thy necessity is yet greater than mine.' And when he had pledged this poor souldier, he was presently carried to Arnheim. . . .

"The last scene of this tragedy was the parting of the two brothers: the weaker showing infinite strength in suppressing sorrow, and the stronger infinite weakness in expressing it. . . . And to stop this naturall torrent of affection in both, [Sir Philip] took his leave, in theis admonishing words: 'Love my memorie, cherish my friends; their faith to me may assure you they are honest. But above all, govern your will and affections by the will and Word of your Creator; in me, beholding the end of this world, with all her vanities.' And with this farewell, desired the company to lead him away. Here the noble gentleman ended the too short line of his life, in which path, whosoever is not confident that he walked the next way to eternall rest, will be found to judge uncharitably." <sup>1</sup>

"I found him entirely himself, though in the last extreme of feebleness," writes Lockhart in telling of Scott's death. "His eye was clear and calm—every trace of the wild fire of delirium extinguished. 'Lockhart,' he said, 'I may have but a minute to speak to you. My dear, be a good man—be virtuous—be religious—be a good man. Nothing else will give you comfort when you come to lie here.' He paused, and I said, 'Shall I send for Sophia and Anne?'—'No,' he said, 'don't disturb them. Poor souls! I know they were up all night.—God bless you all!' With this he sunk into a very tranquil sleep, and, indeed, he scarcely afterwards gave any sign of consciousness, except for an instant on the arrival of his sons. . . . About half-past one p.m. on the 21st of September, Sir Walter breathed his last, in the presence of all his children. It was a beautiful day—so warm that every window was wide open—and so perfectly still that the sound of all others most delicious to his ear, the gentle ripple of the Tweed over its pebbles, was distinctly audible as we knelt around the bed, and his eldest son kissed and closed his eyes. No sculptor ever modelled a more majestic image of repose." <sup>2</sup>

This is the way in which Froude writes of Carlyle's passing:

<sup>1</sup> *Works of Fulke Greville Lord Brooke*, vol. iv. pp. 130-40 (The Fuller Worthies' Library).

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Scott*, vol. vii. pp. 393-4.



“When I saw him next his speech was gone. His eyes were as if they did not see, or were fixed on something far away. I cannot say whether he heard me when I spoke to him, but I said, ‘Ours has been a long friendship; I will try to do what you wish.’ This was on the 4th of February, 1881. The morning following he died. He had been gone an hour when I reached the house. He lay calm and still, an expression of exquisite tenderness subduing his rugged features into feminine beauty. I have seen something like it in Catholic pictures of dead saints, but never, before or since, on any human countenance.”<sup>1</sup>

This chapter, we should add in closing, attempts no more than to hint at the wealth of literature contained in the great mass of English biography. It is perhaps more difficult to exhibit biography by quotation than any other form of composition. Enough has been said if the reader feels an awakened and growing desire to go to the sources for himself.

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Carlyle* (In London), vol. ii. p. 469.

## CHAPTER XII

## IN CONCLUSION

As we come to the close of this historical survey, we find the total achievement of English biographers claiming our attention. What has been accomplished during so long a period? Before turning directly to the answer of this question, we need again to bear in mind that biography began in the British Islands at a late period in the general history of the form; that for many centuries it was written in an alien language; that it was for a still longer period regarded as merely a branch of history; and that, until comparatively recent times, its free course was hindered by the dominating influence of an ethical purpose. It is not surprising, therefore, that its development has been retarded. We have followed the slow course of that development from 690 A.D. to the end of the Latin period; we have seen its more hopeful progress during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and have observed how, from 1744, that progress has been continuous and almost unhampered. A summary review will enable us more fully to appreciate the achievement wrought during twelve centuries.

Appearing as it did late in the general history of the form, English biography has profited by a study of all that had been produced before 690 A.D., as well as of all produced since that date. In other words, its foundations are laid in the past, and its entire fabric has been wrought according to principles brought from far: it has put the whole world under contribution. It has not been, however, merely

imitative; it has given large return to the world for every idea that has been received. We may say, then, that English biographers have accomplished these important results:

(1) Working on foundations laid in the past, they have evolved a clear definition of the form. When John Dryden in 1683 defined biography as "the history of particular men's lives," he not only introduced a new word into the English language, he also introduced a new notion of the word defined into the mind of the world. His definition helped to bring about the next important result.

(2) Working upon Dryden's definition, English biographers have freed the form from the trammels of history proper.

(3) They have cleared biography of panegyric and invective, and hence have freed it from the ethical purpose.

(4) They have refused to allow it to serve as a handmaiden of science, and have thus established its complete independence within its own domain; they have made it autonomous. "Any assistance that biography renders these three great interests—ethical, historical, and scientific—should be accidental; such aid is neither essential nor obligatory."<sup>1</sup>

(5) Accepting the principles set forth by Plutarch, they have fashioned upon them such remarkable biographies as Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, and Froude's *Life of Carlyle*.

(6) More fully than the biographers of any other nation, they have developed the principles of national biography and have produced the best body of such biography in existence.

(7) From the standpoint of importance of subject, skilful workmanship, and literary quality, they have

<sup>1</sup> Lee, *Principles of Biography*, p. 18.

produced the largest number of great biographies in the world.

One leaves a study of biography with the impression that man is yet the most absorbingly interesting subject to man. The amount of life-narrative written, as well as the demand for what is produced, bears witness to the fact that however much man may be engrossed in material pursuits, in the mere things of the world, he is yet deeply interested in his fellows. The manifest interest in the form shows one, too, that man is still the idealist. He is eager to read the story of those other men who have lived bravely. That world-old tendency to succumb to panegyric, that characteristic English habit of striving to make biography serve a moral end, bears witness also to the thirsting of mankind to rise above itself. Life-narratives get more closely to the hearts of men than impersonal histories. "The great charm of biography consists in the individuality of the details, the familiar tone of the incidents, the bringing us acquainted with the persons of men whom we have formerly known only by their works or names, the absence of all exaggeration or pretension, and the immediate appeal from theories to facts."<sup>1</sup> Taking all things into consideration, we should not, perhaps, deplore what we are inclined to call the present-day "excess of biography." In most cases, life-narrative is profitable reading.

One leaves the study, too, with a feeling of the intangibility of this "soul stuff" which goes to the making of mind and spirit; one feels a hopelessness of ever really getting at the heart of a man. "But what is it to tell the facts that he was born, married or lived single, and died?"

<sup>1</sup> Article on Lady Morgan's *Life of Salvator Rosa*, in *Edinburgh Review* (July 1824), p. 317.

asks Egerton Brydges. "What is common to all can convey no information. We desire to know an author's feelings, his modes of thinking, and his habits;—nay, even his person, his voice, and his mode of expressing himself; the society in which he has lived, and the images and lessons which attended upon his cradle."<sup>1</sup> These are the fleeting, intangible, elusive materials which try the soul of a biographer. Boswell records a *dictum* of Dr. Johnson, that "they only who live with a man can write his life with any genuine exactness and discrimination; and few people who have lived with a man know what to remark about him."<sup>2</sup> Carlyle was of the opinion that "a well-written Life is almost as rare as a well-spent one," and that "there are certainly many more men whose history deserves to be recorded, than persons willing and able to record it."<sup>3</sup> "The impossibility of fathoming a great man's mind"—or any man's mind, for that matter—is impressed upon one more forcibly than ever by the reading of many biographies.

It was no doubt because of the difficulty involved in approximating truthful biography, that Wordsworth, Tennyson, and many others have given it as their opinion that the utterances of a poet may more nearly constitute his biography than can anything which is written about him. Tennyson, especially, insisted that life was too subtle to be confined within the covers of a biographical record; it was his own opinion "that *Merlin and the Gleam* would probably be enough of biography for those friends who urged him to write about himself." His opinion is still more clearly set forth in the following sonnet:

"Old ghosts whose day was done ere mine began,  
If earth be seen from your conjectured heaven,  
Ye know that History is half-dream—aye even  
The man's life in the letters of the man.

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<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, vol. i. p. 89.   <sup>2</sup> *Life of Johnson*, Hill, vol. ii. p. 446.

<sup>3</sup> *Essay on Richter*.

There lies the letter, but it is not he  
 As he retires into himself and is:  
 Sender and sent-to go to make up this,  
 Their offspring of this union. And on me  
 Frown not, old ghosts, if I be one of those  
 Who make you utter things you did not say,  
 And mould you all awry and mar your worth;  
 For whatsoever knows us truly, knows  
 That none can truly write his single day,  
 And none can write it for him upon earth." <sup>1</sup>

There is ample testimony that many are in substantial agreement with Tennyson as regards both biography and autobiography. We are accustomed to think of the great autobiographical value of journals, diaries, etc., yet under date of December 14, 1853, Longfellow wrote in his journal: "How brief this chronicle is, even of my outward life. And of my inner life, not a word." In verses that contain more of truth than of poetry Frances Ridley Havergal writes thus:

" AUTOBIOGRAPHY! So you say,  
 So do I *not* believe!  
 For no men or women that live to-day,  
 Be they as good or as bad as they may,  
 Ever would dare to leave  
 In faintest pencil or boldest ink  
 All they truly and really think,  
 What they have said and what they have done,  
 What they have lived and what they have felt,  
 Under the stars or under the sun. . . .

Autobiography? No!  
 It never was written yet, I trow. . . .

You say 'tis a fact that the books exist,  
 Printed and published in Mudie's list,  
 Some in two volumes and some in one—  
 Autobiographies plenty. But look!  
 I will tell you what is done

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<sup>1</sup> Sonnet written originally as a preface to *Becket*. Published in Preface to *Alfred Lord Tennyson, a Memoir by his Son*.

By the writers, confidentially!  
 They cut little pieces out of their lives  
 And join them together,  
 Making them up as a readable book,  
 And call it an autobiography,  
 Though little enough of the life survives.  
 Ah no! We write our lives indeed,  
 But in a cipher none can read  
 Except the author. He may pore  
 The life-accumulating lore  
     For evermore.  
 And find the records strange and true,  
 Bring wisdom old and new.  
 But though he break the seal,  
 No power has he to give the key,  
     No licence to reveal.  
 We wait the all-declaring day,  
 When love shall know as it is known;  
 Till then, the secrets of our lives are ours and God's alone."<sup>1</sup>

Not dissimilarly has Walt Whitman written:

"When I read the book, the biography famous,  
 And is this, then, (said I), what the author calls a man's life?  
 And so will some one, when I am dead and gone, write my life?  
 (As if any man really knew aught of my life;  
 Why, even I myself, I often think, know little or nothing of my  
     real life;  
 Only a few hints—a few diffused, faint clues and indirections,  
 I seek, for my own use, to trace out here.)"<sup>2</sup>

In the light of such testimony, the Rev. Thomas Davidson's exclamation seems to carry weight: "And if a man has so much ado to understand his own heart, how much less valuable will be his diagnosis of his neighbour's." The nearest approximation to the truth would seem to come from a union of biography and autobiography—the result of a man's own record of himself carefully supplemented by a discriminating analysis and interpretation

<sup>1</sup> Poem, *Autobiography*, May 1869.

<sup>2</sup> "When I Read the Book," *Leaves of Grass*, p. 14.

written by some other person able and willing to speak the truth. "Perhaps," writes Mr. Edwards, "the autobiographer is most usefully employed when he acknowledges to himself that he can, at the best, but supply rough material for another man to work upon. . . . Such material, how imperfect soever, must always be numbered among the best sources of true biography. Whatever the admixture of fallacy, and alike whether the fallacy arise from deceit or from self-delusion, an autobiography cannot but be, *in its measure*, a true revelation of the man that composed it. It cannot but show (sometimes in the writer's despite) much of the soul within, as well of the garb in which that soul was clothed, and of the circumstances in the midst of which it acted and strove. The mental measure of a biographer would seem to lie in the degree in which he is able to read between the lines of such autobiographic material." <sup>1</sup>

From no angle, in short, does the task of biography seem easy, whether one is writing of self or of another. Perhaps no other form of composition is so difficult; no other deals with such elusive material. Other forms of composition deal with thought and emotion—things subtle and elusive enough in themselves—but biography deals with the source of thought and emotion, with man himself in his inward and outward manifestations. Who is sufficient for such a task?

"In biography, as in other walks of intellectual labour, a man must set his aim much above his reach, if he would really attain the full limit of his real power. The ideal 'biographer' has to seek a more than possible harmony between the beginning of a life and its end—on earth—or he will fail to elicit from the small incidents of youthful days, and from the unripe strivings of early manhood, the indications of character which they so often contain. To the eye

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<sup>1</sup> *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography*, p. 18.



that has gained real insight, a trivial anecdote of childhood may very truthfully present

' The baby figure of the giant mass  
Of things to come, at large.'

In proportion as the biographer succeeds in putting saliently before the eyes of his readers the various sets—so to speak—of outward circumstance and surroundings in which his subject was successively placed, and extracts from the evidence of what the man ultimately did and was, the loss or gain derived from those external influences, he becomes the true narrator of a life. He becomes pre-eminently that, if he be able to elicit, as he nears the earthly close of the tale he is telling, what it really was that the man he writes about gathered out of this life, to carry with him into the next. If the biographer be able to do this in some degree, he makes his readers to feel that our human life is always a probation, as well as a combat, and not merely to acknowledge that deep truth in conventional language. No biographer can possibly do this perfectly. The most gifted one can but get glimpses into a human heart. He cannot see it as it was. To make those glimpses truthful ones is to the real biographer both cross and crown. They are at once the crucial difficulty and the crowning glory of his task. No writer can fully achieve it. He must, perhaps, combine something of the poet with not a little of the philosopher in order to do any part of it. But unless he can make some approximation to such a result, he has mistaken his calling. And the mere attempt to achieve it is a function which belongs to the biographer distinctively. It is no part of the work of the historian of a nation."<sup>1</sup>

"There is neither picture, nor image of marble, nor arch of triumph, nor pillar, nor sumptuous sepulchre, can match the durableness of an eloquent biography, furnished with the qualities which it ought to have," wrote wise old Jacques Amyot in 1565.<sup>2</sup> For more than twelve centuries British biographers, confident of the value of their work,

<sup>1</sup> Edwards, *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Lee in the *Principles of Biography* from the "*Aux Lecteurs*" of Amyot's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*: ". . . car il n'y a ny statues, ny trophées de marbre, ny arcs de triomphe, ny colonnes, ny sepultures magnifiques, qui puissent combattre la durée d'une Histoire eloquente, accomplie de qualitez qu'elle doit avoir."

have been labouring to furnish it with "the qualities which it ought to have." They have not yet succeeded in embodying all these qualities in any one work, nor in combining them in just the ideal proportions; but they have approximated success more closely than have the biographers of any other nation. We may look forward to the future with confidence, in the assurance that English biography—that is, all save the mere ephemeral and worthless stuff doomed from the beginning to oblivion—is to be in every way more carefully wrought. It will not be hastily and illogically put together. It will be more unified, more coherent, more selective, exhibiting more completely the qualities of concentration, brevity, and self-effacement; in short, it is destined to be, far more than it has been in the past, a work of art.

## APPENDIX

### I

#### BIOGRAPHICAL COMPILATIONS IN LATIN

1. *Catalogus Scriptorum Ecclesiae*: John Boston. "I know of no writer of literary memoirs in this kingdom prior to John Boston, a monk of St. Edmund's Bury, who, early in the fifteenth century, wrote a catalogue of the principal manuscripts contained in our universities and monasteries, with some account of the lives of the authors. The title of his book, according to Bale and Pits, was *Catalogus Scriptorum Ecclesiae*; but neither of these writers are to be depended upon in point of titles. Boston's plan was probably more general. Archbishop Usher formerly possessed a copy of this curious manuscript, which Dr. Thomas Gale intended to publish. This I learn from a manuscript note of Mr. Oldys, in Fuller's *Worthies*. I also learn from the same writer that, in the latter end of the reign of King William, there appeared an advertisement announcing a speedy publication of Boston's book; it was never printed."—B. A considerable portion of Boston's manuscript was printed in Wilkin's preface to Tanner's *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica*, 1748.

2. *Commentarii de Scriptoribus Britanniae*: John Leland. Oxford, 1709. "Generally supposed to have taken his facts from Boston . . . [of whom] he makes not the least mention. . . . His *Commentarii* . . . contain a number of important facts, which however might have been better related in less than half the number of pages, and that half might have been still considerably

abridged by omitting king Bladud, king Lucius, the emperor Constantine, and many others who had no better title to the rank of authors. . . . After Leland's death his MS. fell into the hands of John Bale."—B.

3. *Illustrium Majoris Britanniae Scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriae, ac Scotiae, Summarium*: John Bale, Ipswich, 1548. ". . . so implacably inveterate against those of the Romish Church, that there is hardly a Billingsgate phrase in the Latin language which he has not employed in their abuse. . . . Except what he borrowed from Leland's manuscript, there is nothing valuable in his book. At the end of the life of each author he pretends to give a catalogue of their works, with which he was in general so little acquainted, that he frequently multiplies one book into five or six, by mistaking the title of a chapter for that of a book."—B. "The merits of Bale's Catalogue are neither so many nor so eminent as is generally supposed."—Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, Preface, p. xxxix. See also John Bale's *Index of British and Other Writers*. Edited by Reginald Lane Poole and Mary Bateson. (Anecdota Oxoniensa, Oxford, 1902.)

"Loe here the man who stir'd Romes comon shore  
 Untill it stunk, and stunk him out of dore.  
 Twelve years he serv'd the Babilonian witch;  
 Drank of her cup and wallowed in her ditch,  
 Untill the sunshine of diviner Truth  
 Shot saving beames into his hopefull youth:  
 And led him thence to serve another Saint  
 Whose mirth was teares, whose freedom was restraint;  
 Whose progresse was a banishment; whose food  
 Was want and famine, and whose drinke was blood:  
 His dayes were full of troubles, and his nights  
 Were sad exchanges stor'd with feares and frights:  
 His wealth was poverty, his peace was strife,  
 His life was death: his death eternall life."

Quarles' verses on John Bale, in  
*Abel Redeivivus*, pp. 510-11.

4. *Joannis Pitsei Angli, S. Theologiae Doctoris, Liverduni in Lotharingia Decani, Relationum Historicarum de Rebus Anglicis, Tomus Primus*. Paris, 1619. Generally known as the *de Illustribus Angliae Scriptoribus*: John Pits. This constitutes one (the fourth) of a series of volumes prepared by Pits, and is the only one that has been printed. The others contain the lives of the English monarchs, bishops, and "apostolic members" of the English Church, respectively; the original MSS. are preserved at the collegiate church at Verdun. Pits was a Romish priest and hence has preserved much information concerning Catholic writers. "Not less partial to those of his own religion than his predecessor Bale from whom he took most of his materials without acknowledgment; but he was infinitely more polite. . . . His book . . . abounds with mistakes, and his lists of works are exceedingly erroneous. He comes down to . . . 1614."—B.

5. *Herwologia Anglica, hoc est, clarissimorum et doctissimorum aliquot Anglorum qui floruerunt ab anno Christi M.D. usque ad presentem annum M.D.C.XX. Vivaee effigies, Vitae, et elogia*. Arnheim, 1620. Henry Holland (1583–1650?).

6. *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Scotorum*: Thomas Dempster. Bologna, 1627. "This book contains a short account of a number of Scotch authors; but Dempster was so exceedingly desirous of increasing his catalogue that he makes Scotchmen of many writers who were certainly born in other countries. *Il crut, says a French writer, faire honneur à sa patrie, en faisant naître dans son sein une foule d'écrivains étrangers, & il s'en fit très peu à lui-même.* (*Nowv. Dict. Historique*, article Dempster)."—B. "Although displaying great industry, the book is chiefly remarkable for its extraordinary dishonesty."—Henry Bradley, *Dictionary National Biography*, article "Dempster."

7. *De Scriptoribus Hiberniae*: Sir James Ware. Dublin, 1639. "His lives are short, and confined to authors born or preferred in Ireland. He begins with the introduction of Christianity in that kingdom, and ends with the sixteenth century. Such circumstances as he was able to collect he relates impartially and seldom gives any character of his authors or their writings."—B.

8. *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Historia Literaria, a Christo Nato usque ad Saeculum XIV. Facili methodo digesta. Qua de vita illorum ac rebus gestis, de Secta, Dogmatibus, Elogis, Stylo; de Scriptis genuinis, dubiis, supposititiis, ineditis, desperditis, fragmentis; deque variis operum Editionibus perspicuè agitur. Accedunt Scriptoris Gentiles, Christianae Religionis oppugnatores; et cujusvis Saeculi Breviarum*: William Cave, 1688; (Pars Altera), 1698. The work extends only to the beginning of the fourteenth century. Later, Henry Wharton and Robert Gery continued it to 1517. More reliable than the works of Bale and Pits, yet poor when measured by present-day standards.

9. *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica*: Thomas Tanner, 1748. "It was the elaborate work of forty years' application. His lives of authors are taken chiefly from Leland, Bale, and Pits; the first of whom he constantly transcribes verbatim. We are, however, much obliged to his lordship for adding to the life of each author a much more accurate list of works than is to be found in any preceding biographer."—B. "On all questions connected with the early literature of our nation, Tanner's *Bibliotheca*, notwithstanding its many omissions, defects, and redundancies, is still the highest authority to which the inquirer can refer. As a storehouse of historical materials, it is invaluable; although the vast information contained in it is badly arranged and requires a careful and critical revision."—Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue*, Preface, p. xlii.

## II

BIOGRAPHICAL COMPILATIONS IN  
ENGLISH

(To the end of the Eighteenth Century)

1. *Abel Redeivous : or the dead yet speaking. The Lives and Deaths of the Moderne Divines. Written by severall able and learned men (whose names ye shall finde in the Epistle to the Reader). And now digested into one Volume, for the benefit and satisfaction of all those that desire to be acquainted with the Paths of Piety and Virtue. Prov. 10. 7. The memory of the just is blessed, but the name of the wicked shall rot.* 1651. [Thomas Fuller.] "The chief merit of this book is its being the first biographical volume published in the English language: at least, I know of none of an earlier date."—B.

2. *The History of the Worthies of England. Endeavoured by Thomas Fuller, D.D.* 1662. "His accounts of authors are generally taken from Bale and Pits; but the doctor's natural propensity to be witty was so exceedingly prevalent that he constantly seems to wish rather to make his readers merry than wise."—B.

3. *Theatrum Poetarum, or a compleat collection of the Poets, especially the most eminent of all ages, the Ancients distinguish't from the Moderns in their several alphabets. With some observations and reflections upon many of them, particularly those of our own nation. Together with a prefatory discourse of the Poets and Poetry in General. By Edward Phillips.* 1675. "It is a small volume, containing a short account of ancient and modern poets in general, among which there are some Englishmen."—B.

4. *The Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons in this Later Age. In two parts : I. Of Divines. II. Of Nobility and*

*Gentry of both Sexes.* By Samuel Clark, Sometimes Pastor of Bennet Fink, London. 1683.

5. *The Lives of the most Famous English Poets, or the Honour of Parnassus ; in a Brief Essay of the Works and Writings of above Two Hundred of them, from the Time of K. William the Conqueror, to the Reign of His Present Majesty King James II.* By William Winstanley. 1687.

6. *Athenae Oxonienses. An Exact History of all the Writers and Bishops who have had their Education in the most antient and Famous University of Oxford, from the Fifteenth Year of King Henry the Seventh, An. Dom. 1500, to the End of the Year 1690. Representing the Birth, Fortune, Preferment, and Death of all those Authors and Prelates, the great Accidents of their Lives, and the Fate and Character of their Writings. To which are added, the Fasti, or annals of the said University, for the same time.* [By Anthony Wood, M.A.] 1691. "The work was first begun in the Latine tongue, and for some time continued on in the same, but upon the desire of a worthy person (now dead) who was an encourager thereof, it was thought more useful to publish, as you will now find it, in an honest plain English dress, without flourishes, or affectation of stile, as best becomes a history of truth and matter of fact. It is the first of its nature, I believe, that has ever been printed in our own, or any other, mother tongue: for tho' several authors (particularly *Ant. du Verdier*, a Frenchman) have written histories or descriptions of illustrious men of their respective countries in their own language, eminent as well for the sword as pen, yet that of Verdier, and all of the like subject are different from this present *triple variety*, written for the most part in the nature of a *Bibliothèque*; which, I presume, no person, as yet, hath done the like, in his native tongue."—From Wood's "To the Reader." "His manner is cynical, his language antiquated, and his civil and religious opinions illiberal."—B.



7. *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets : or, Some observations and Remarks on the Lives and Writings of all those that have Publish'd either Comedies, Tragedies, Tragi-Comedies, Pastorals, Masques, Interludes, Farces, or Opera's in the English Tongue.* By Gerard Langbaine. 1691.

8. *De Re Poetica : or, Remarks upon Poetry. With Characters and Censures of the most Considerable Poets, whether Ancient or Modern. Extracted out of the best and choicest criticks.* By Sir Thomas Pope Blount. 1694. A compilation of very little biographical value.

9. *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets. Also an Exact Account of all the Plays that were ever yet Printed in the English Tongue ; their Double Titles, the Places where Acted, the Dates when Printed, and the Persons to whom Dedicated ; with Remarks and Observations on most of the said Plays. First begun by Mr. Langbain, improv'd and continued down to this time by a Careful Hand.* [Charles Gildon (1665-1724)] [1698].

10. *The Great Historical, Geographical, Genealogical, and Poetical Dictionary. . . . Collected . . . more especially out of Lewis Morery, D.D., his Eighth Edition Corrected and Enlarged by Monsieur Le Clerc . . . to which are added, by way of Supplement, intermix'd throughout the Alphabet, the Lives, most Remarkable Actions, and Writings of several Illustrious Families of our English, Scotch, and Irish Nobility, and Gentry. . . . Revised, Corrected, and Enlarged to the Year 1688 ; By Jer. Collier, A.M.* 1701. Two volumes.

11. *The Poetical Register : or, the Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets. With an Account of their Writings.* [Giles Jacob.] 1719. "The foundation of the work is owing to Mr. Langbain, who was the first that

brought these memoirs into any tolerable form. . . . As to the accounts of the living authors, most of them came from their own hands, excepting such parts as relate to the fame of their writings, where I thought myself at liberty to give such characters of praise or dispraise as the best judges before me had passed upon their performances." From the "Preface." "They [the works of Winstanley, Langbaine, Gildon, and Jacob] are generally transcripts from each other and are all trifling performances. They have been since absorbed in Cibber's *Lives of the Poets*." —B.

12. *Biographia Britannica: or, the Lives of the most eminent persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the earliest ages down to the present times: collected from the best authorities, both printed and manuscript, and digested in the manner of Mr. Bayle's Historical and Critical Dictionary.* London, 1747.

"It was with this view that the *Biographia Britannica* was undertaken; it was in order to collect into one body, without any restriction of time or place, profession or condition, the memoirs of such of our countrymen as have been eminent, and by their performances of any kind deserve to be remembered. We judged that this would be a most useful service to the publick, a kind of general monument erected to the most deserving of all ages, an expression of gratitude due to their services, and the most probable means of exciting, in succeeding times, a spirit of emulation which might prompt men to an imitation of their virtues. This was the first and great motive to the attempting such a collection, towards which, indeed, we saw that there were considerable materials ready prepared, though no sign of any such buildings being ever traced, or that there had ever been a thought, either as to the expediency or possibility of erecting such a structure: a *British Temple of Honour*, sacred to the piety, learning, valour, publick-spirit, loyalty, and every other

glorious virtue of our ancestors, and ready also for the reception of the worthies of our own time, and the heroes of posterity."—Preface, p. viii.

"It was compiled with great labour, and full of copious and exact details; but commonly dull, without force of character, and without adequate discrimination. The plan, which is that of Bayle, is not altogether the best. The notes make a perpetual impediment to reading the narrative consecutively, and render it more fit to be consulted as a dictionary than as a work of amusement. The form is like Bayle's, but not the spirit. Scarce any article rises above mere compilation."—Egerton Brydges, *Autobiography*, vol. i. p. 99.

13. *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland to the Time of Dean Swift. Compiled from ample materials scattered in a variety of books, and especially from the MS. notes of the late ingenious Mr. Coxeter and others, collected for this design, by Mr. [Theophilus] Cibber.* In four volumes. 1753. [The title-pages of vols. ii., iii., iv., and v. read "By Mr. Cibber, and other hands."]

"It was undertaken on the foundation of a copy of Langbain's *Lives*, which was bought at the sale of Coxeter's books. . . . It is, to say no worse of it, an insignificant performance."—B

14. *A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England, with Lists of their Works.* [Horace Walpole.] Printed at Strawberry Hill. 1758.

"The matter it contains is curious and important; the language polished, nervous, and pointed; the sentiments impartial, liberal, noble."—B.

15. *The Biographical Dictionary.* 1761. Twelve volumes.

"Whatsoever degree of merit there may be in this compilation, it seems due to the booksellers, who appear frequently to have used printed copies of former publica-

tions, without the assistance of an author, or even a transcriber."—B.

16. *Companion to the Playhouse*. 1764. Two volumes. ". . . contains a better and more comprehensive account of our dramatic poets and their works, than any other book in the English language [to 1777]."—B.

17. *Biographia Literaria; or a Biographical History of Literature: containing the Lives of English, Scottish, and Irish authors from the Dawn of letters in these Kingdoms to the present time, chronologically and classically arranged*. [John Berkenhout, M.D. 1777.] Only vol. i. (from the beginning of the fifth to the end of the sixteenth century) was issued.

The work is of no great intrinsic merit. It is chiefly of interest because of the remarks made by Dr. Berkenhout upon previous biographical compilations. Where these have seemed just and to the point, they have been quoted in the present volume, and marked "B." This much of Berkenhout's labour deserves preservation.

### III

#### ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

These lists are adapted, with corrections, by kind permission, from Burr's *The Autobiography*. N.B.—To place an autobiographer in correct chronology, it is obvious that the date given must be that of his death. Yet it often happens that a man may cover a certain era in his autobiography, and be therein connected with a certain group, and then live so many years after writing it that the date of his death, taken by itself, would seem to connect him with a wholly different epoch. Where two dates are given, the second is that of the publication of the autobiography.

## LIST I. (CONTAINING GROUPS 1, 2, AND 3)

Our first four names are those of writers whose autobiographies are brief, mere terse accounts of events domestic or political:

	<i>died</i>
Thomas Tusser . . . . .	1580
Sir Thomas Bodley . . . . .	1613
Richard Vennar . . . . .	1615 (?)
Lucy Hutchinson . . . . .	after 1675

In twenty-five years more we find a group of detailed and subjective self-studies (\*), of which Blair and his friends are definitely religious. This is a group entirely apart from the Quakers. Those marked (†) are of political and objective chroniclers merely. Note that out of eighteen autobiographies, but eight deserve to be termed self-studies. Groups 1, 2, and 3 are determined partly by date, partly by a certain family likeness in style:

## GROUP 1

	<i>died</i>
Margaret of Newcastle . . . . .	1674
*Lord Herbert of Cherbury . . . . .	1648
*Simonds D'Ewes . . . . .	1650
*Sir Kenelm Digby . . . . .	1665
*Robert Blair . . . . .	1666
†Lord Clarendon . . . . .	1674
*James Fraser of Brae . . . . .	1699
*John Livingstone . . . . .	1672

## GROUP 2

Walter Pringle . . . . .	1667
Lady Fanshawe . . . . .	1680
William Lilly . . . . .	1681
†Lord Shaftesbury . . . . .	1683

	GROUP 3	<i>died</i>
†James Melvill . . . .		1617 (1683)
†Sir John Reresby . . . .		1689
*Richard Baxter . . . .		1691
†John Bramston . . . .		1700
Anne, Lady Halkett . . . .		1699
*John Bunyan . . . .		1688

## LIST II. (CONSISTING OF GROUP 4, ENGLISH QUAKERS)

## GROUP 4

The English Quakers here listed form a continuous and compact group, running steadily, without variation in manner or method, as late as 1840:

	<i>Seventeenth Century</i>	<i>died</i>
John Audland . . . .		1663
Samuel Fisher . . . .		1665
Richard Farnsworth . . . .		1666
William Caton . . . .		1665
John Crook . . . .		1699
Stephen Crisp . . . .		1694
Edward Burroughs . . . .		1662
James Parnel . . . .		1656
Isaac Pennington . . . .		1679
Alexander Jaffray . . . .		1673
William Dewsbury . . . .		1688
Charles Marshall . . . .		1698
Francis Howgill . . . .		1669
George Fox . . . .		1691
Dr. John Rutty . . . .		
William Evans . . . .		
Alice Ellis . . . .		
John Wibur . . . .		

<i>Eighteenth Century</i>				<i>died</i>
Gilbert Latey	.	.	.	1705
Elizabeth Stirredge	.	.	.	1706
Alice Hayes	.	.	.	1720
Margaret Fox	.	.	.	1702
Richard Claridge	.	.	.	1723
Richard Davies	.	.	.	1708
Thomas Ellwood	.	.	.	1713
John Banks	.	.	.	1710
William Edmundson	.	.	.	1712
Christopher Story	.	.	.	1720
George Whitehead	.	.	.	1723
Thomas Story	.	.	.	1742
Samuel Bownas	.	.	.	1753
James Dickinson	.	.	.	1741
John Woolman	.	.	.	1772
Thomas Chalkley	.	.	.	1741
Elizabeth Ashbridge	.	.	.	1775
Job Scott	.	.	.	1793
James Gough	.	.	.	1712
Oliver Sansom	.	.	.	1710

*Nineteenth Century*

Jane Pearson	.	.	.	1816
Abraham Shackleton	.	.	.	1818
Henry Hull	.	.	.	1834
Thomas Shillitoe	.	.	.	1836
Daniel Wheeler	.	.	.	1840

## LIST III. (CONTAINING GROUPS 5 AND 6)

Contemporaneous with List II. (Group 4) is the first small group of genuinely *scientific* self-students (\*). Seven names are similar in idea and in method, of whom the greatest is Franklin. Of the remaining names, we find

four writing religious confessions wholly independent as to creed (†):

	<i>died</i>
Gilbert Burnet . . . .	1715
*John Flamsteed . . . .	1719
William Taswell . . . .	1731
*Edmund Calamy . . . .	1732
†John Dunton . . . .	1733
*Roger North . . . .	1734
†William Whiston . . . .	1752
Colley Cibber . . . .	1757
Charlotte Charke . . . .	1760 (?)
George Psalmanazar . . . .	1763
*David Hume . . . .	1776
Thomas Newton. . . .	1782
*Benjamin Franklin . . . .	1790
Mary Robinson . . . .	1800
*Edward Gibbon . . . .	1794
Theobald Wolfe Tone . . . .	1798
William Henry Ireland . . . .	1835 (1796)
*Joseph Priestley. . . .	1804
†George Whitefield . . . .	1770
†Henry Alline . . . .	1784

#### LIST IV. (CONTAINING GROUPS 7 AND 8)

Imitators of Franklin and of Gibbon (\*) form a defined Group from 1809 to 1826. There is also a subsidiary Group (†) of literary self-analysers, religious and introspective in tone. Out of twenty-eight names, twenty are strongly subjective, approaching the zenith of self-study in English. The List covers about fifty years:

	<i>died</i>
*Thomas Holcroft . . . .	1809
Richard Cumberland . . . .	1811
*William Hutton . . . .	1815
*Richard Edgeworth . . . .	1817



	<i>died</i>
*James Lackington . . . .	1815
*Samuel Romilly . . . .	1818
†William Hayley . . . .	1820
Arthur Young . . . .	1820
*Catherine Cappe. . . .	1821
*Thomas Bewick . . . .	1828
*William Gifford . . . .	1826
Alexander Carlyle . . . .	1805 (1860)
Walter Scott . . . .	1832
†Egerton Brydges . . . .	1837
†John Galt . . . .	1839
James Hogg . . . .	1835
Robert Burns . . . .	1796
†Sir Capell Lofft . . . .	1824
†Joseph Blanco White . . . .	1841
Robert Southey . . . .	1843
†Benjamin Robert Haydon . . . .	1846
*Samuel Roberts . . . .	1848
†William Wordsworth . . . .	1850
†Leigh Hunt . . . .	1859
Thomas De Quincey . . . .	1859
*Ann Gilbert . . . .	1866
†Samuel T. Coleridge . . . .	1834
*Robert and William Chambers . . . .	1871-83

LIST V. (CONSISTING OF GROUP 9, THE SCIENTIFIC,  
1850-1900)

A clearly defined contemporary Group:

Charles Darwin	Charles Bray
Thomas Henry Huxley	Harriet Martineau
Alexander Bain	Frances Power Cobbe
Herbert Spencer	Mark Pattison
John Stuart Mill	Edmund Gosse
Alfred Russel Wallace	George John Romanes
Charles Babbage	(Diary)
Frederic Harrison	

## LIST VI. (MISCELLANEOUS, 1850-1900)

The only cluster approaching a Group is the *Literary-Artistic* formed about the Pre-Raphaelite movement (\*). Important subjective cases are marked (†):

Anthony W. Trollope	*J. Addington Symonds
†Annie Besant	Zerah Colburn
Walter Besant	Lady Morgan
Lord Brougham	George Harris
Lord Campbell	*George Moore
Mrs. Eliza Fletcher	Ulysses S. Grant
William Powell Frith	Andrew White
†Elizabeth Grant	*John Ruskin
†Augustus J. C. Hare	Samuel Smiles
*W. Holman Hunt	Lord Wolseley
Henry Layard	†F. W. Newman
Col. Meadows Taylor	John Freeman Clarke
Lord Roberts	Louis Agassiz
F. Locker-Lampson	Mrs. Charles Bagot
William C. Macready	†John Beattie Crozier
†Cardinal Newman	†C. G. Finney
*W. M. Rossetti	†Philip Gilbert Hamerton
†Margaret O. W. Oliphant	

## IV

## SHAKESPEARE IN BIOGRAPHY

1. The first attempt to write a biography of Shakespeare was made by Thomas Fuller. The following is the text as printed in the *Worthies of England*, 1662:

“ William Shakespeare was born at Stratford-on-Avon in this [Warwick] county; in whom three eminent poets may seem in some sort to be compounded. 1. Martial, in the warlike sound of his surname (whence some may conjecture him of a military extraction) Hasti-vibrans or Shake-speare. 2. Ovid, the most natural and witty

of all poets; and hence it was that Queen Elizabeth, coming into a grammar school, made this extempory verse:

' Persius a crab-staff, Bawdy Martial, Ovid a fine wag.'

3. Plautus, who was an exact comedian, yet never any scholar, as our Shakespeare (if alive) would confess himself. Add to all these, that though his genius generally was jocular, and inclining him to festivity, yet he could (when so disposed) be solemn and serious, as appears by his tragedies; so that Heraclitus himself (I mean if secret and unseen) might afford to smile at his comedies, they were so merry; and Democritus scarce forbear to sigh at his tragedies, they were so mournful. He was an eminent instance of the truth of the rule, *Poeta non fit, sed nascitur*; one is not made but born a poet. Indeed his learning was very little, so that, as Cornish diamonds are not polished by any lapidary, but are pointed and smoothed even as they are taken out of the earth, so Nature itself was all the art which was used upon him. Many were the wit-combats betwixt him and Ben Jonson; which two I beheld like a Spanish great galleon and an English man of war: Master Jonson (like the former) was built far higher in learning; solid but slow in his performances, Shakespeare, with the English man of war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about, and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention. He died anno Domini 16—, and was buried at Stratford upon Avon, the town of his nativity."

2. Next in order is the sketch by John Aubrey. The text is that of Clark's *Aubrey's "Brief Lives,"* vol. ii. pp. 225-27:

" Mr. William Shakespear was borne at Stratford upon Avon in the county of Warwick. His father was a butcher, and I have been told heretofore by some of the neighbours, that when he was a boy he exercised his father's trade, but when he kill'd a calfe he would doe it in a high style, and make a speech. There was at that time another butcher's son in this towne that was held not at all inferior to him for a naturall witt, his acquaintance and coetanean, but dyed young.

" This William being inclined naturally to poetry and acting, came to London, I guesse, about 18; and was an actor at one of the play-houses, and did act exceedingly well (now B. Johnson was never a good actor, but an excellent instructor).

" He began early to make essayes at dramatique poetry, which at that time was very lowe; and his playes tooke well.

"He was a handsome, well-shap't man; very good company, and of a very readie and pleasant smooth witt.

"The humour of . . . the constable, in *Midsomernight's Dreame*, he happened to take at Grendon in Bucks—I thinke it was Midsomer night that he happened to lye there—which is the roade from London to Stratford, and there was living that constable about 1642, when I first came to Oxon: Mr. Josias Howe is of that parish, and knew him. Ben Johnson and he did gather humours of men dayly where ever they came. One night as he was at the tavern at Stratford super Avon, one Combes, an old rich userer, was to be buried, he makes there this extemporary epitaph:

Ten in the hundred the Devill allows,  
But Combes will have twelve, he sweares and vowes:  
If any one askes who lies in this tombe,  
'Hoh!' quoth the Devill, 'Tis my John o Combe.'

"He was wont to goe to his native countrey once a yeare. I thinke I have been told that he left 2 or 300 *li.* per annum there and thereabout to a sister. *Vide* his epitaph in Dugdale's *Warwickshire*.

"I have heard Sir William Davenant and Mr. Thomas Shadwell (who is counted the best comoedian we have now) say that he had a most prodigious witt, and did admire his naturall parts beyond all other dramaticall writers. He was wont to say (B. Johnson's *Underwoods*) that he 'never blotted out a line in his life'; sayd Ben: Johnson, 'I wish he had blotted-out a thousand.'

"His comoedies will remaine witt as long as the English tongue is understood, for that he handles *mores hominum*. Now our present writers reflect so much upon particular persons and coxcombeities, that twenty yeares hence they will not be understood.

"Though, as Ben: Johnson sayes of him, that he had but little Latine and lesse Greek he understood Latine pretty well, for he had been in his younger yeares a schoolmaster in the countrey.—from Mr. . . . Beeston."

3. We may next examine the sketch in Langbaine's *English Dramatic Poets*, 1691. It will be noticed that Langbaine's sketch follows closely that by Fuller. The date of Shakespeare's death is supplied, together with a few additional facts. The portions which constitute a criticism and an enumeration of the plays are omitted, as not strictly relevant to our purpose:

“ William SHAKESPEAR. One of the most Eminent Poets of his Time; he was born at *Stratford upon Avon* in *Warwickshire*; and flourished in the Reigns of Queen *Elizabeth* and King *James* the First. His Natural Genius to *Poetry* was so excellent, that like those *Diamonds*, which are found in *Cornwall*, Nature had little, or no occasion for the Assistance of Art to polish it. The Truth is, 'tis agreed on by most, that his Learning was not extraordinary; and I am apt to believe that his skill in the *French* and *Italian* tongues, exceeded his knowledge in the Roman language. . . . I have now no more to do, but to close up all, with an Account of his Death; which was on the 23d of *April*, Anno Dom. 1616. He lyeth Buried in the Great Church in *Stratford upon Avon* with his Wife and Daughter *Susanna*, the Wife of Mr. *John Hall*. In the North Wall of the Chancel, is a Monument fixed which represents his true Effigies, leaning upon a cushion. . . .”

4. The next really important advance was that made by Nicholas Rowe in his *Some Account of the Life, &c., of Mr. William Shakespeare*, prefixed to the edition of the *Plays*, 1709. This is now easily accessible in D. Nichol Smith's *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*. James MacLehose and Sons, Glasgow, Publishers.

5. As an example of the manner in which high-flown phraseology was used to conceal lack of information, we give the first part of the sketch from Cibber's *Lives of the Poets*, vol. i. pp. 123-24. The remainder simply adapts information already known:

“ There have been some ages in which providence seemed pleased in a most remarkable manner to display itself, in giving to the world the finest genius's to illuminate a people formerly barbarous. After a long night of Gothic ignorance, after many ages of priestcraft and superstition, learning and genius visited our Island in the days of renowned Queen Elizabeth. It was then that liberty began to dawn, and the people having shook off the restraints of priestly austerity, presumed to think for themselves. At an Aera so remarkable as this, so famous in history, it seems no wonder that the nation should be blessed with those immortal ornaments of wit and learning, who all conspired at once to make it famous.—This astonishing genius seemed to be commissioned from above to deliver us not only from the ignorance under which we laboured as to poetry, but to carry poetry almost to its perfection. But to write a panegyric on Shake-

spear appears as unnecessary as the attempt would be vain; for whoever has any taste for what is great, terrible, or tender, may meet with the amplest gratification in Shakespear; as may those also have a taste for drollery and true humour. His genius was almost boundless, and he succeeded alike in every part of writing. . . .

All men have discovered a curiosity to know the little stories and particularities of a great genius; for it often happens that when we attend a man to his closet and watch his moments of solitude, we shall find such expressions drop from him, or we may observe such instances of peculiar conduct, as will let us more into his real character than ever we can discover while we converse with him in publick, and when perhaps he appears under a kind of mask. There are but few things known of this great man; few incidents of his life have descended to posterity, and tho' no doubt the fame of his abilities made a great noise in the age in which he flourished, yet his station was not such as to produce many incidents, as it was subject to but few vicissitudes. Mr. Rowe, who well understood and greatly admired Shakespear, has been at pains to collect what incidents were known, or were to be found concerning him, and it is chiefly upon Mr. Rowe's authority we build the account now given. . . . "

6. The sketch which appeared in the *Biographia Britannica* is not generally accessible. It is worth while to reprint it as summarising the knowledge in regard to Shakespear to the date of its publication, as well as showing the state of biographical dictionaries at that time. The text is taken from the first edition of vol. vi. part i. pp. 3627-39; its date, 1763. The text is given in full; the footnotes, which are highly interesting, but unnecessary for our purpose, are omitted; they refer to all preceding published accounts:

" Shakespear [William] was descended of a gentleman's family, at Stratford upon Avon, in the county of Warwick; but his father entering into the wool-trade, dealt considerably that way. He married the daughter and one of the heirs of Robert Arden, of Wellincote in the same county. This gentlewoman brought him ten children, of whom our poet was the eldest, being born in April 1564. At a proper age he was put to the free-school in Stratford, where he acquired the rudiments of Grammar-learning. Whether he discovered at this time any extraordinary genius or inclination for the

Classics, is very uncertain; to make the best of any, he might be endued with, in that kind, was not the point in his father's view. He had no design to make a scholar of his son, but, on the contrary, took him early from school into his own business. He did not continue very long in this employ, as a minor, under the immediate guidance of his father; he resolved to write man sooner than ordinary, and at seventeen years of age married a woman of twenty-five. However, in respect to fortune, it was no imprudent match; and thus young Shakespeare not only commenced master of a family, but became father of two if not three children, before he was out of his minority. So settled, he had no other thoughts than of pursuing the wool-trade, when happening to fall into acquaintance with some persons, who followed the practice of deer-stealing, he was prevailed upon to engage with them in robbing Sir Thomas Lucy's park, at Cherlcot near Stratford. The injury being repeated more than once, that gentleman was provoked to enter a prosecution against the delinquents; and Shakespeare in revenge made him the subject of a ballad, which tradition says (for unluckily the piece is lost) was pointed with so much bitterness, that it became unsafe for the author to stay any longer in the country. To escape the hands of the Law, he fled to London, where, as might be expected from a man of wit and humour in his circumstances, he threw himself among the players. Thus, at length, this grand luminary was driven, by a very untoward accident, into his genuine and proper sphere of shining in the universe. His first admission into the play-house was suitable to his appearance; a stranger, unacquainted and uninformed in this art, he was glad to be taken into the company in a very mean rank. Neither did his performance recommend him to any distinguished notice. The part of an actor neither engaged nor deserved his attention; it was very far from filling, or being adequate to, the prodigious powers of his mind: he turned the advantage which that situation afforded him, to a higher and nobler use; and having, by practice and observation, acquainted himself with the mechanical part of the theatre, his native genius inspired all the other most essentially superior qualities of a play-wright. But the whole view of this first attempt in stage-poetry being to procure a subsistence, he directed his endeavours solely to hit the taste and humour that then prevailed amongst the meaner sort of people, of whom the audience was generally composed; and therefore his images of life were drawn from those of that rank. These had no notion of the rules of writing, or the model of the Ancients. Shakespeare also set out without the advantage of education, and without the advice or assistance of the learned; equally without the patronage of the

better sort, as without any acquaintance among them. But when his performances had merited the protection of his Prince, and the encouragement of the Court had succeeded to that of the Town, the works of his riper years are manifestly raised above those of his former. The dates of his plays sufficiently evidence, that his productions improved, in proportion to the respect he had for his auditors. In this way of writing he was an absolute original, and of such a peculiar cast, as hath perpetually raised and confounded the emulation of his successors; a compound of such very singular blemishes as well as beauties, that these latter have not more mocked the toil of every aspiring undertaker to emulate them than the former, as flaws intimately united to the diamonds, have baffled every attempt of the cunningest artists to take them out, without spoiling the whole. Queen Elizabeth, who shewed Shakespeare many marks of her favour, was so much pleased with the delightful character of Sir John Falstaff, in the two parts of *Henry IV.* that she commanded the author to continue it for one play more, and to shew the Knight in love, which he executed inimitably in *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* Among his other patrons, the Earl of Southampton is particularly honoured by him, in the dedications of two poems, *Venus and Adonis*, and *Lucrece*; in the latter especially he expresses himself in such terms, as gives countenance to what is related of that patron's distinguished generosity to him. In the beginning of King James the First's reign (if not sooner) he was one of the principal managers of the play-house, and continued in it several years afterwards; till having acquired such a fortune as satisfied his moderate wishes and views in life, he quitted the stage, and all other business, and passed the remainder of his time in an honourable ease, among the conversation of his friends, at his native town of Stratford, with the gentlemen of the neighbourhood, to whom his pleasurable and good nature rendered him very agreeable. He lived in a very handsome house of his own purchasing to which he gave the name of New Place; and he had the good fortune to save it from flames, in the dreadful fire that consumed the greatest part of the town, in 1614. It is very probable, he did not much exercise his talent in poetry, after his retirement. In the beginning of the year 1616 he made his Will, wherein he testified his respect to his quondam partners in the theatre; he appointed his youngest daughter, jointly with her husband, his executors, and bequeathed to them the best part of his estate, which they came into the possession of not long after. He died on the 23d of April following, being the fifty-third year of his age, and was interred among his ancestors, on the north side of the Chancel, in the great church of Stratford, where there is a handsome



monument erected for him, inscribed with a simple elegiac distich in Latin. In the year 1740, another noble and most beautiful one was raised to his memory, at the public expence, in Westminster abbey; an ample contribution for this purpose being made, upon exhibiting his tragedy of *Julius Caesar* at the theatre-royal in Drury Lane, April the 28th, 1738. Seven years after his death, his plays were collected and published in 1623, in folio, by two of his principal friends in the company of comedians, Heninge and Condale; who likewise corrected a second edition in folio, in 1632. Though both these editions were extremely faulty, yet no other was attempted till 1714, when a third edition was published in 8vo by Mr. Nicholas Rowe, but with few if any corrections; only he prefixed some account of our author's life and writings, the materials of the first of which were communicated to him by Mr. Betterton, the celebrated Comedian, who made a journey to Stratford, purposely to learn something further concerning a man, to whom both he and all the world were so much indebted. But the plays being in the same mangled condition as at first, Mr. Pope was prevailed upon to undertake the task of clearing away the rubbish, and reducing them into a better order; and accordingly he printed a new edition of them in 1721, in 4to. Yet neither did this give satisfaction, and the performance only discovered the editor to be a better poet than he was a critic; at least of Shakespeare's genius. Hereupon Mr. Theobald, after many years spent in the same task, published a piece called *Shakespeare restored*, in 1726, in 8vo, which was followed by another new edition of his plays in 1733, by the same author, who therein carried the design of his first piece much farther. In 1744, Sir Thomas Hanmer, Bart., published at Oxford a pompous edition, with emendations, in six volumes, 4to. To these Mr. Warburton, now Lord Bishop of Gloucester, added still another new edition, with a great number of corrections, in 1747. And Mr. Theobald published his edition a second time, with several alterations, in 1757. There has appeared very lately this year, 1760, an historical play, intituled, *The Raigne of Edward the Third, &c.*, which is ascribed to Shakespeare upon these three concurring circumstances, the date, the stile, and the plan, which is taken, as several of Shakespeare's are, from Holingshead, and a book of novels, called *The Palace of Pleasure*. Thus new monuments are continually rising to honour Shakespeare's genius in the learned world; and we must not conclude, without adding another testimony of the veneration paid to his manes by the publick in general: which is, that a mulberry-tree, planted upon his estate by the hands of this revered bard, was cut down not many years ago, and the wood being converted

into several domestic uses, these were all eagerly bought at a high price, and each single one treasured up by its purchaser as a precious memorial of Shakespeare's memory."

7. With the preceding, the reader will find interest in comparing the latest and best attempt, that of Sir Sidney Lee in his *A Life of William Shakespeare*, 1898; new and revised edition, 1915. In the Appendix to his work, Mr. Lee gives a list of all available sources which throw light on the life of Shakespeare.

The nineteenth century was rich in biographical dictionaries. The culmination of such works was, of course, the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Maitland, in the *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, p. 365, cites the following estimate of the *D. N. B.*, from Ch. Petit-Dutaillis' *Revue de Synthèse historique* (1904), p. 360: "Ni notre *Biographie universelle*, ni notre *Biographie générale* ni les articles fort inégaux de notre *Grande Encyclopédie* ne peuvent être comparés à ce monument d'érudition généralement très sûre."

For a complete list (to the date of its publication) of all biographical compilations in the English language, consult *The Dictionary of Biographical Reference . . . together with a Classed Index of the Biographical Literature of Europe and America*. By Lawrence B. Phillips. London, 1871. See also *A Handbook to the Literature of General Biography*. By Edward Edwards and Charles Hole. 1885.

No complete bibliography of English biography has ever been made. It is a question whether such a bibliography would be practicable, containing, as it would, hundreds of well-nigh worthless narratives. For a brief bibliography of selected biography consult Thomas Nelson and Sons' *Standard Books*.

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